



L. Pratt



CHILDREN'S CHILDREN

THIRD VOLUME

CHILDREN'S CHILDREN

A STORY OF TWO GENERATIONS

BY

ALAN MUIR

IN THREE VOLUMES

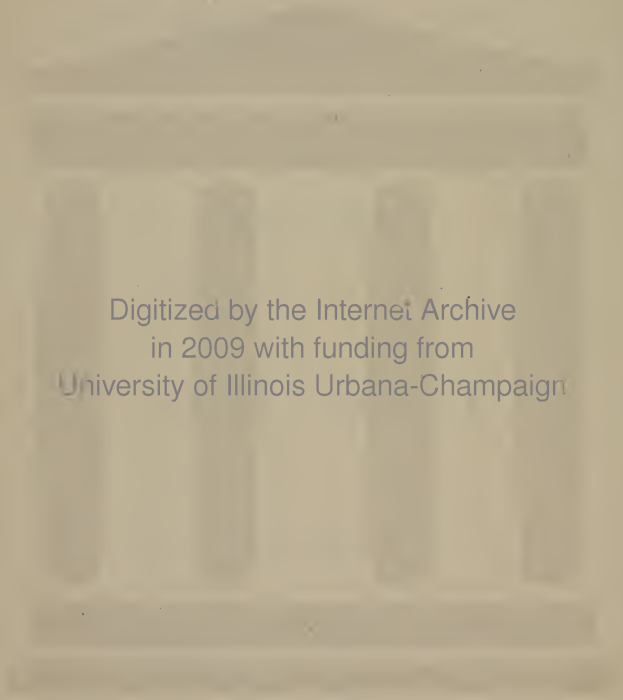
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CHILDREN'S CHILDREN.



CHAPTER I.

THE FINGER OF FATE.

CIRCUMSTANCES seemed to conspire with Detmar on every side. While Penruddocke lingered, halting between the promptings of honour and the suggestions of baseness, disposed one hour to abandon every worldly hope for Mercy's sweet sake, and tempted the next to betray her, under the plea of her interest and his own, a solitary incident occurred which, though not unexpected, brought matters to a conclusion.

Miss Crow rang her bell with great violence one morning after breakfast, and summoned the gigantic Viles into her presence. Viles, although she scolded him cruelly on the slightest provocation, was the only one of her servants whom she admitted in any degree to her confidence, and to him she now imparted the resolution at which, as it appeared, she had suddenly arrived.

‘I go to London this evening,’ she said.
‘I have some directions to leave with you.’

At this announcement Viles was greatly surprised, for his mistress had never since he knew her made a journey; and indeed her age, and great infirmity, seemed to forbid it. But so profound was his awe of the old lady, that if she had said she was going to start on an expedition to the North Pole, he would have listened without a demonstration of surprise.

‘Every servant in this house is to be dismissed,’ continued Miss Crow, ‘and yourself with them. Each is to have one month’s wages, and ten pounds as a mark of my satisfaction. The gardener’s boy and the kitchen-maid, and the under-housemaid, are to have five pounds. None of you must be in the house upon my return. To those who think proper to go back to their native places immediately, and take service there, I shall give their travelling expenses, and a farther sum of ten pounds, that is, if they are settled in service within a month of the time they leave my house.’

‘Yes, ma’am,’ said Viles, as meekly as if his mistress had simply ordered the carriage.

‘Beyond this I require some farther service of you, Viles,’ the old lady proceeded, noting, however, with satisfaction her servant’s attentive and composed manner. ‘I wish you to

secure for me a set of servants in all departments. I can trust your judgment, and you can recommend my service. These servants must be here this day week early in the morning, at which time I shall expect you to undertake the instruction of them in their several duties for three or four days. That done, you are to meet me in London, and report to me the state of the house. I shall then return here, and if I find that you have made suitable arrangements, I shall reward you with a gift of twenty pounds.'

Viles bowed very low, and now ventured to express his regret at losing so good a mistress, and hoped that he and his fellow-servants had not given dissatisfaction.

'Far from it, Viles,' replied his mistress graciously. 'I have my own reasons for making this change, which are quite apart from any fault in you. You have served me

well, without any exception. And as far as you personally are concerned, you shall find, if you carry out my present orders in a satisfactory way, that you have gained a friend, though you lost a mistress.'

The giant bowed very low.

'You—and you only'—continued Miss Crow, 'are to have communication with the new servants. If any other of my present servants speak to them or communicate with them in any way, they forfeit my favour. I shall surely find it out. And you must not say anything to these new servants about me, my appearance, or habits ; and I have chosen Manchester as the place where these servants are to be engaged, as I wish them to have no previous knowledge of the neighbourhood. Upon my arrival I shall see them one by one and give them further directions.'

Viles was not so much surprised at this

part of the conversation as might have been expected, for he remembered that the circumstances of his own engagement were somewhat similar.

‘On the night of my return I give a dinner party,’ said Miss Crow, when she had sufficiently impressed her directions upon the man’s mind. ‘Now on this subject I have some special instructions to give you.’

The old lady proceeded to say that, as the incoming servants might be a little awkward, it would be prudent to engage a confectioner to provide the dinner and attendance for that evening. She described with great minuteness how the table was to be set, and where the guests were to be placed.

‘My friends Mr. Bolton and his son will dine here, and one young lady, and my friend Miss Bolton, who is coming to visit me—four in all, you see, Viles.’

‘And yourself, ma’am—five,’ Viles ventured to remark.

Miss Crow gave an odd little start.

‘I said four in all,’ she cried angrily. ‘I shall not dine with the party, but I shall meet them in the drawing-room afterwards.’

All her directions were repeated several times in order, and when she saw that they were fairly imprinted on the man’s mind, she commanded him to repeat the lesson over from first to last. At the first slight mistake she flew at him, as if she would bite his head off, and by her violence reduced him to such a state of dismay and confusion that, before he could recover himself, and satisfy her that he remembered what he had been told, the perspiration stood upon his forehead. At last, however, he was dismissed, and Miss Crow sat down to her desk, and began to write letters.

Her first was to Mercy :

‘ Dear Child,—I leave here for a few days to transact some important money business in London. This day fortnight I want you to dine with me, and I will take no excuse. You are thoroughly recruited by this time. I have a friend to whom I wish to introduce you. Mind, I don’t ask your presence, but require it.

‘ I am your faithful friend,

‘ ELINOR CROW.’

The second letter was to Hercules :

‘ Dear Mr. Bolton,—Will you give me the pleasure of your company at dinner this day fortnight, and bring Penruddocke with you. Your sister, Miss Diana Bolton, will be staying with me, and she is to bring with her the young lady to whom she is going to marry her nephew.

‘ Faithfully yours,

‘ ELINOR CROW.’

The third letter was to Penruddocke :

‘ Dear Penruddocke,— This day fortnight you are to dine with me. You will meet the young lady whom your aunt wishes you to marry ; and after you have seen her, perhaps you will confess that I knew your aunt’s character when I told you that she would not be cruel or inconsiderate.

‘ Your faithful friend,

‘ ELINOR CROW.’

When Pen received this letter he turned very pale, and crushed it between his fingers.

‘ Fate has spoken,’ he cried. ‘ Guilty or not guilty, I shall fly with Mercy to-morrow night.’

And he, in his turn, wrote to his friend Detmar.

CHAPTER II.

THE FINGER OF GOD.

THE end of November was come, but the weather was mild and sunny, and a gentle autumnal haze spread over land and sea, waiting to be scattered by the beams of the mid-day sun. As yet it was early morning, and the air soft and still. The woods, which went feathering down to the very edge of the water, had yet a few brown leaves lingering on their branches ; the birds were encouraged by the cheerful sunlight to pour out their songs ; and all things told of a year that was sinking to its grave with ' unperceived decay.' Mercy looked out of her little parlour window at the soft delicious scene.

Why was her heart—as pure as the shining dewdrop that hung from the rose-branch which trailed downwards from the window-sill—so disquieted? Never before had she looked out on a scene like this without feeling in her own breast a responsive tranquillity, but now she was full of clouds, and cares, and fears. God bestows on really good women the best of all gifts, a conscience so fine in its sensibilities that it shrinks from evil, even though the evil be disguised in the garb of virtue. Mercy did not know that she was about to do wrong. She had carefully searched out her own heart, and weighed all the circumstances, and had not discovered that, in flying with Penruddocke, she was committing any sin. But, for all her self-persuasions, she was unhappy. Several considerations, which in the hurry and disorder of her spirits she had

never defined to herself, operated to produce this embarrassment.

At first she had refused to consent to Penruddocke's proposal altogether, and this from reasons of the purest and most self-forgetting love. She declared that she would never suffer him to take a step for her sake which would endanger his prospects in life. But he reasoned with her that, by a little contrivance, discovery might be avoided; and, if discovery did ensue, he protested that poverty with her would be sweeter, a thousand times sweeter, than wealth without her. She could compensate him, he declared, for the loss not of one fortune but ten. It is not easy for an affectionate woman, however sensible she may be, to listen to such reasoning unmoved. Mercy was constrained to believe that she could sweeten a life of poverty for a man whom she loved, for

would not he sweeten a life of poverty for her? By this enamoured logic she satisfied herself for a time, but her misgivings were only partially satisfied, and would return obstinately.

Indeed, there was about Penruddocke a certain constraint which awakened Mercy's uneasiness. Through the conversations he had with her he never seemed quite at ease, but would start, and stammer, and change colour, without any apparent cause. Little did Mercy suspect that her own artless confidence, and her bewitching expressions of tenderness, acting upon a mind conscious of baseness but not hardened to it, brought out these symptoms of uneasiness. More than once her pure, balmy, loving kiss fell like a flake of fire on his lips, and he was ready to fall on his knees and tell her all. But he conquered the impulse, though not without a perceptible struggle; and Mercy, who noticed

his singular manner, wondered why he was so disquieted, and never satisfied herself as to the reason.

He had been to see her for the last time before their flight, and all particulars were settled. That night he was to meet her with a carriage, and they were to drive across country to a railway station ten miles off, from which they would take the train to Southampton, where the registrar was to marry them. Mercy had yielded to what appeared to be Pen's prudent contrivance, and had foregone a wedding in church.

She had written a letter, to be delivered to her kind old companion Trip after her departure, in which she said that she was going away on private business, and would return in a few days. Penruddocke had charged her not to say anything about her departure beforehand, and she had, after much per-

plexity and arrangement, worded a letter which she believed would allay fear and suspicion in the old woman's mind. But all this plotting was strange to Mercy, and she felt unhappy. A foreboding of danger and trouble encompassed her, though her actual prospect seemed as bright as the morning. As to poverty, she never gave that a thought, except for Penruddocke's sake.

Still, while the day wore on her doubts and fears kept thickening, and as each tick of the clock brought the moment of her flight nearer, her trepidation increased. One question haunted her—why does Pen seem so uneasy and troubled, if all is as clear as he wishes me to believe? She pondered this question hour after hour in vain, but at last the reply flashed upon her. Why had she not thought of it before?—Penruddocke was deliberately sacrificing himself for her sake.

He secretly regretted that which he was too honourable to evade. He had won Mercy's affections, and he would be true to her at the price of a life's prosperity, but he could not suppress his anxiety in the face of so formidable a choice. How noble—how like Penruddocke!

‘Never, never, my darling, shall your life be blighted for me!’ exclaimed Mercy, as this conviction broke upon her. But how was she to act? In a few hours Penruddocke would be with her, and he would pour into her ears the same eloquent, unselfish arguments which had so often entranced her already, and she would yield—fly—and by one infatuated act darken his whole life. One thing was clear. If she wished really to save Pen from the fate which his generous heart was preparing for himself, she must see his face no more. His words—his looks—would overpower all her resolutions.

To a certain extent, in these reflections and vows Mercy was only repeating under a new form a decision at which she had arrived more than once before. But there was one important point of difference. Never till now had she suspected that Pen, in his heart of hearts, might desire to be free, while he nobly refused to break his engagements. Could she, for his dear sake, constrain herself to dash from her lips the cup of joy which fate held out to her? The wife of Penruddocke—her whole being tingled with intoxicating delight as she thought of such a lot. But was she his true lover, if she married him?

‘No!’ she cried again, ‘and if I die of the hunger and the thirst of love I shall never be anything but his true lover. Before he comes here to-night I shall be far away—far from him, and love, and madness.’

How hard—how agonising—was the

struggle in her tender breast God only knew. She paced her room. She pressed her clenched hands against her heart. Time after time there flashed upon her a gleam of the rapture she would feel flying away with Pen—flying to happiness, to bliss which no thought could anticipate. Yes, she was lying on his breast. She felt his breath on her cheek. A low, passionate whisper was in her ear. He was bending over her, and calling her ‘my wife.’ ‘Husband of my soul!’ she cried in answer, and both were dissolved in a melting embrace. Dreams, only dreams! But when were ever realities so intense, so thrilling? ‘O God, have mercy on me, and give me strength,’ she cried, for her resolution seemed sinking away and disappearing amidst the surge of passionate imagination that beat and swept around her in a flood of terrible delight. ‘Strengthen me, or I

yield, and buy my own happiness at the cost of his.'

She clung to her resolution, and besought support from Heaven in a more formal way, and as she spread her ardent, guileless soul before her Maker's eyes and confessed her weakness, she grew stronger. Love conquered passion. None was there in that quiet little room to mark how lovely she looked, clad in the charms of two worlds. But well might Pen have given up all for her.

She had not tasted food all day, and evening was closing in. Little more time remained than was needful for her escape from the house before Penruddocke would appear, and at this moment Mrs. Trip entered the room with two letters in her hand.

'Post was late to-day, miss,' said she. 'The old man's pony fell lame, and he had to walk all the way.'

Mercy glanced at the envelopes : one was addressed in Pen's writing, and the other in Miss Crow's. Her first impulse was greedily to tear his letter open, but she restrained herself.

‘Only more love,’ she sighed to herself. ‘Only more tempting words. If I read it I shall be weak again.’

And she thrust the perilous letter into her pocket, for she could by no means bring herself to destroy it. Then she opened Miss Crow's little note, and read the invitation to dinner.

Now it happened that this trifling incident had a very tonic effect on Mercy, for it led her to reflect on Miss Crow's kindness and goodness, and to think how ashamed she should feel if the old lady should ever find out that she had been deceiving her long ago. Companionship is a wonderful support to

virtue. Mercy thought of her old friend's integrity and truthfulness, and felt invigorated for the final act. She wrote a hasty line accepting the invitation, and saying that, although she might not return to Uphill before the evening fixed for the little party, she would take care to appear at the appointed hour. And now she must take her flight in secret, and hide herself from Pen, until circumstances, and her own recovered resolution, should enable her to resist his spell. She wrote a few hasty lines to him, telling him why she had gone, and assuring him that pursuit was in vain, and that in a fortnight's time she would return to Uphill. Well she knew, she added, his noble self-forgetting love, but she would not suffer him to blast his life for her sake. No ; she could never marry him—and she would never forget him !

It was now dark, and the hour of his

arrival was at hand. Trembling with excitement she ran up to her little room, and made herself ready for her expedition ; but when all was done she lingered, half hoping that he might come upon her unawares, and take matters out of her hands. At last her fluttering heart fairly stopped as she heard the sound of wheels, but her resolution revived though her blood stood still. Down stairs she flew letter in hand, into the little kitchen, and cried out to the wondering Trip, 'Give this to Mr. Bolton. I shall not be back for some days. Don't be frightened, and don't tell anybody.'

And with these words she darted out of the back door, and into the little garden, just as Penruddocke's knock was heard. The carriage stood at the garden-gate, with its lamps burning, and again her determination wavered. But she drew in her breath, and reanimated

herself with the thought that she was really showing her love to Pen, and opening a little gate at the side of the garden, she passed out, and ran wildly along a narrow lane, which led into the main street of the village. From this she dived down a steep path, and in one minute was on the dark sea-shore, safe from pursuit, for the rocks around offered a hundred hiding places if Penruddocke should think of following her to such an unlikely spot.

CHAPTER III.

PENRUDDOCKE'S REPENTANCE.

DURING the fortnight that followed, Penruddocke Bolton suffered more than many sinners of his dye endure in a lifetime. Chagrin at the disappearance of Mercy was only a small part of his misery ; indeed, there was mixed with this a certain sense of relief, for his wickedness was at least uncommitted. But he had made a terrible mistake. He had written to Detmar on the subject of his flight and mock marriage, and this letter he had by accident slipped into the envelope addressed to Mercy Travis. He remained quite unconscious of his blunder until his return home,

after he had abandoned all hopes of finding Mercy. A telegraph awaited him, and when he opened it he found it was from Detmar. It simply said—‘Your letter to M. T. has come in my envelope. Have you sent her your letter to me?’ Penruddocke could answer the question in a moment : he must have done so, for both letters were written together, and none beside. He dropped into a chair, and almost fainted away. He was beginning to taste the bitterness of retribution, although he had not enjoyed the pleasure of sin.

Almost frantic he took the night mail to London, and was thundering at Detmar's door at six o'clock next morning. The little man was asleep, but he soon woke up when his friend began to speak, for self-interestness is not one of the drowsy virtues, and the collapse of the scheme was bad news for

him. After an anxious day he had gone to rest more at his ease, concluding from Penruddocke's silence that, by some happy chance, the letter intended for him had not been sent to Mercy. He sat up in his bed and heard Penruddocke's story with a very blank face, and with frequent epithets which custom has decreed shall be blank also. He could give no comfort to Penruddocke, having no new plan to suggest ; and so he lay, cursing his friend for a stupid fool in his heart, but fawning on him with his lips, as became a philosopher of his sort in such a predicament.

‘The girl found you out then?’ said he, when Pen paused in his story. ‘Found you out, and gave you the slip.’

‘No!’ cried Penruddocke wildly. ‘Her old woman told me that the post was late that day, and my letter did not reach her

until five o'clock ; and that she saw Mercy thrust it unopened into her pocket. I questioned the old woman, and she said that two letters came, one of which Mercy read on the spot. My letter had a large red seal on it, and this, Mrs. Trip said, she did not open. Her note to me was written at four, and in it she said she was running away because she loved me too well to let me ruin myself for love of her. So her flight was an act of affection not of disgust.'

Detmar emitted an ejaculation expressive of incredulity, but Pen heard him not.

'Oh, Detmar !' he cried, rising and clasping his hands, 'that girl is an angel, and I—I am a villain !'

'There are such things as villains,' replied Detmar coolly, 'but not such things as angels. However, you are no more a villain than—' he paused for a similitude—'than I am.'

You tried to have a frolic with this girl, and you failed. Very well. Let her go to——.'

And he flung himself back on his pillow. However, as he soon perceived that the state of affairs would require his interference, he abandoned his sulky mood, and began to talk matters over with an air of concern.

'What do you mean to do?' he asked.

'I mean to find Mercy out,' exclaimed Penruddocke, who was still wild with excitement. 'I shall tell her I am a wretch, and a deceiver, and throw myself at her feet, and if she refuses to forgive me, I shall blow my brains out. If she does forgive me, I shall marry her in the face of my aunt and all the world.'

Detmar bit his lips to hide a smile.

'If you must either marry her or blow your brains out,' said he gravely, 'I should recommend you to blow your brains out.'

That will be the safer alternative. But as a matter of fact you will do neither.'

'I will,' cried Pen, 'by heaven, I will.'

'You won't, by heaven you won't,' retorted the other, who indeed showed no small insight into his disciple's character. 'You will return home, and wait quietly for your aunt's dinner-party; you will go there, and meet your intended, probably a nice girl enough, for one woman is very like another. Then you will marry her, like a good little boy. You will get your slice of plum cake, and who knows but the angelic Mercy may be yours after all. Stranger things have happened.'

Pen lifted his hand in protestation, but Detmar stopped him with a gesture.

'Wait a moment,' he said, getting out of bed, and slipping on his dressing-gown. 'You are very tired. I have some brandy in the next room, and a bottle of soda.'

This was his own breakfast, but he was ready for once to give it up out of friendship. He poured out nearly two glasses of brandy, and having qualified this with an equal quantity of soda-water, returned to the bedroom with the sparkling beverage in his hand. 'Drink that,' said he, 'every drop before you speak again.'

Penruddocke felt sick and weary, and the draught tasted pleasant enough, so he obeyed his friend, and in a moment he felt the fire of the spirit running through his veins.

'Deucedly strong brandy that,' said he, laying the glass down. 'It is refreshing, though.'

'Try a little more,' said Detmar. 'There is a drop of soda left. You have had nothing to speak of.'

And this student of human nature, who well apprehended the significance of the phrase, 'physiology of mind,' drained his

brandy bottle of the last glass, and to tempt Pen the more, made him hold the tumbler, while he poured in the remnant of soda-water which sparkled gratefully.

‘Drink it while the fizz is on,’ cried Detmar. ‘Nothing like the sting of fresh soda for a jaded man,’ and, indeed, Penruddocke began to feel that something was stinging him pretty sharply. ‘Now,’ said Detmar, throwing himself upon his bed, with the air of one whose mind is relieved, ‘now let us talk about this girl.’

In one word, Detmar, by his crafty management, got Penruddocke pretty well in hand in half an hour’s time, even persuading him that Mercy had used him ill. As to flying in the face of his aunt, Pen soon confessed that this would be imprudent; and even went so far as to promise to obey her in the now impending matter of marriage.

Detmar, highly delighted with his success, had still fears lest his friend might, if left to himself, backslide from this righteous state of mind, and prudently resolved to keep at his side for a few days. Accordingly he persuaded Pen to stay a while with him in town, and the two friends saw a little life together, Penruddocke paying all expenses. Added to this, Detmar contrived to edge in another loan of a hundred pounds, so that when on the morning of the day fixed for Miss Crow's little party he saw his friend off by train, he was in high good-humour. 'Write and tell me what you think of her,' he said at parting, referring to the lady unknown whom Pen was to meet that night.

'I shall—to-morrow,' replied Pen, as the train began to move off.

'And remember,' cried Detmar, resolved to sum all his teaching of the past week in an

epigram, 'remember, it would take a very pretty woman to make a meal of bread and cheese and small beer taste as good as venison and champagne.'

Penruddocke laughed, and nodded, and passed out of sight. Then with a sigh he threw himself back in the carriage, and began to think things over.

CHAPTER IV.

TWO IN ONE.

HERCULES and his son stood side by side before the glowing fire in Miss Crow's drawing-room. The father, whose sight had now quite gone, was feeling about him for a chair, but Penruddocke, absorbed with his own thoughts, did not notice his movements.

‘You are a hopeful youth,’ cried Hercules at last, with a snort of indignation. ‘Can you not see I am looking for a chair?’

Pen begged his father's pardon, and led him to a seat, but sank into silence the next moment.

‘Are you dumb?’ growled Hercules. ‘What are you thinking about?’

‘ I was wondering,’ replied Pen, ‘ what she is like.’

‘ What who is like ? ’ demanded Hercules snappishly.

The son glanced down at his father’s face, and answered with a bitter smile—

‘ I wonder what my aunt Diana is like. I have never seen her.’

‘ Oh, you were thinking of *her*,’ said the father with an ugly sneer, which showed he was not deceived. ‘ I can satisfy your curiosity. She is lean and bony, with a loud voice, and a disagreeable face. She has a will like steel and flint, and a temper to make the devil tremble. If you cross her——’

He shook his head and said no more, indicating that inexpressible results would follow such imprudence.

‘ If she should wish to marry me to somebody like herself——’ Penruddocke began.

‘If she should wish to marry you to a skeleton,’ retorted Hercules, without waiting to hear more, ‘or to a hungry tigress for that matter, do it rather than provoke her. I provoked her once.’

The conversation was stopped at this point, for the door opened, and little Miss Crow was seen working her way in her particular fashion across the floor. She advanced to Hercules, and greeted him with tolerable warmth, and when she turned to Penruddocke her manner became almost tender. She held his hand in her own, and spoke in a low voice, under whose notes a great deal of feeling lay.

‘Dinner will be a little late,’ she said, after a while. ‘Your aunt’s young friend has not come yet, but she has promised to be here, and she will not fail us. She will come straight from the railway station, but it will

not take her long to change her dress, for she is a simple little creature ; simple with the simplicity of wisdom,' added Miss Crow in a still softer voice.

The instant Hercules heard the sound of the old woman's voice he started, and as she went on speaking he turned his sightless face towards her in a perplexed, anxious way, like a man afraid of something that he cannot describe.

'Have you seen her ?' Penruddocke asked.

'I have,' replied Miss Crow, and she said no more.

At this point Hercules, turning his face this way and that about the room, as if he would have given worlds for one glimpse of his surroundings, inquired in a nervous, hesitating tone if his sister had arrived.

'She is in the house now,' replied Miss Crow.

Hercules did not venture to ask any more questions.

The very fact that his sister was near filled him with terror, and he was fearful that, if he asked the smallest question he might offend. So a silence followed.

‘Perhaps I may as well tell you at once, Mr. Bolton,’ said Miss Crow, ‘that Diana will not appear this evening. In fact, she does not intend to see you at all.’

Again at the sound of her voice Hercules started, but when he heard what she said his manner became composed.

‘Indeed,’ was all his answer. He knew his sister, and nothing that she could have done would have surprised him.

‘Are you aware,’ continued Miss Crow, ‘that when Diana left England, she made a vow that she would see her friends no more?’

‘I heard something of the kind,’ Hercules answered, becoming nervous again.

‘And did you ever know her to change her mind?’ Miss Crow inquired.

‘Never in my life,’ replied Hercules. ‘She is a wonderful woman—and an amiable woman,’ he added, making a great gulp of relief when he had got the words fairly out. Miss Crow smiled in a knowing way, but did not remark upon the compliment paid to her friend.

‘Diana has come to England,’ she went on, ‘in order that the arrangements for your son’s marriage may be more readily carried out, but she has resolved to see nobody except myself. She will not break her word. When the wedding is over, she will return to France, and see England no more.’

Another pause followed, and Penruddocke seized the opportunity.

‘ You tell me you have seen my intended,’ he said to Miss Crow, ‘ now do let me hear what she is like.’

‘ You shall see her in half an hour,’ Miss Crow answered with a most unusual sprightliness. ‘ However, as lovers are impatient, I will tell you something about her beforehand. Bring your chair over, and sit beside me.’

She went apart from Hercules, who sat moodily with his face toward the fire, and when Penruddocke had drawn his chair close to her, she began to speak in a whisper, but with a warmth and earnestness which greatly surprised the young man.

‘ Have you ever, in a morning walk, plucked a wild rose which had just opened into blossom, and which no human eye but yours had ever seen, and no human hand touched ?’ she said, ‘ a wild rose, fresh, fragrant, the perfection of colour and form,

white and pink, with a dewdrop between its leaves, lovely with all the artless loveliness of nature ?’

To hear the hard matter-of-fact Miss Crow allegorising in this way was enough to make Penruddocke ask himself if he were awake or dreaming. But he only raised his eyes, and said, ‘I understand you : go on.’

‘In bodily beauty,’ said Miss Crow, raising her voice unconsciously as she proceeded, and falling back in her chair that she might with less effort watch Penruddocke’s face, ‘your future wife is like that wild rose. No poet ever dreamed of a lovelier woman.’ She paused, and her silence gave the young man time to fill in this delightful picture after his own fancy.

‘But her mind, her heart, her character,’ continued the old woman, with eyes that glistened, and a countenance beaming with

pleasure, 'to what shall I compare these? So sweet, so womanly, so truthful. She has so many virtues, and in such perfection, that you would imagine that the one must encroach upon the other, until you saw the whole united in a character that is more than human, for it is quite ideal in its beauty.'

The old woman kept her eyes fixed upon the lamp which burned on the table beside her, and its light fell on her snowy hair, and shone in her eyes, which seemed filled with the vision of the person she was describing. Penruddocke felt his blood warming, and began to think that obedience and Detmar were not bad guides of conduct after all.

'And now I have a surprise for you,' cried Miss Crow, beaming out in positive fun. 'Such a surprise! such a delightful surprise! A surprise to make you leap from your chair,

and clap your hands, and rejoice that you trusted your aunt, and obeyed her voice.'

'Have you?' said Penruddocke, responding to a vivacity which it was impossible to withstand; 'it must be a surprise, if you talk of it in this way.'

'You know this girl,' said Miss Crow in an eager tone, seizing his arm, and gazing into his face.

'Know her!' cried Penruddocke, 'this is a surprise indeed. Still I do not see why I am to leap and clap my hands.'

'Wait a moment,' Miss Crow answered. 'You have often spoken with this girl, walked with her, flirted with her, kissed her, I dare say; only you never let it out, sly fox that you are.'

Tears stood in the old woman's eyes, although her speech was so frolicsome, and her whole manner spoke of a pleasure so deep

that it had pathos in it, as all very deep pleasure must have. She let go Penruddocke's arm, and laid her hand gently in his. But there was no enjoyment in his manner, for a dreadful thought struck him as the last words were uttered.

‘Tell me—for God's sake tell me,’ he whispered hoarsely, ‘what is the name?’

‘Don't be afraid,’ said Miss Crow, looking quite sweet in her tender playfulness. ‘Her name will be music in your ears. It is Mercy Travis.’

Penruddocke did, indeed, leap from his chair, but it was with a bound such a man is said to make when he is stabbed to the heart, and about to drop lifeless to the ground. He walked backward toward the door, and bowed his head into his hands, and he thought this moment of immeasurable and unexpected agony must be his last. The old lady, who

mistook his anguish for excess of rapture, rose and came to his side.

‘ I knew all about your love for her, dear boy,’ said she. ‘ It was I who chose her for you. It was I who wrote to my dear Diana, and said you ought to get married. And she wrote back at once, taking, as she always does, the brave and kind-hearted view of things. Oh, Penruddocke, what a friend you have in your aunt ! I know how she loves you, and in this instance I have tested her affection. The moment she knew this girl was good, and that you loved her, she resolved to make you both happy. Mind : there was nothing kept back. I told Diana frankly that the girl was what is called religious, but I added—what I sincerely believe—that she has such substantial goodness as ensures that she will make you a good wife, in spite of her errors. And her errors

will disappear,' said the old woman confidently. 'I don't believe any sensible person can continue to believe in rubbish for ten minutes after the case has been fairly put before them. That piece of education Diana leaves to you ; and be sure of this, the moral beauty of Mercy's character will shine out tenfold when her intellect is purged of her present notions, which are simply inherited prejudices. If wealth, and a beautiful and virtuous wife, and she the woman of your own free choice, can make a man happy, happiness shall surely be yours.'

With all his might Penruddocke had been trying to regain something like an appearance of composure while the old woman was speaking, but in vain. When she paused, and waited for him to reply, his feelings quite overcame him, and he cast himself into a chair, and with his head fallen on his breast

groaned aloud. Miss Crow, however, interpreted his emotion in the way that seemed most natural to her.

‘I understand your feelings,’ she said soothingly. ‘You thought you were going to be doomed to an ungracious marriage, and to be separated from one you tenderly loved; and now you cannot believe the truth for joy. Well: you might have trusted your aunt. You obeyed her, however, and implicit obedience is the most real trust after all.’

‘O, my great God!’ cried Penruddocke, rising from his seat and walking wildly across the room, throwing his arms abroad in the air in a way which was common to members of the Bolton family when they were deeply moved. ‘My heart will burst! my brain will split in two!’

Amazed at what she heard, Miss Crow looked up in his face, and saw that he was

deathly pale, and that tears were running down his cheeks.

‘My boy! My dear boy!’ she said.
‘What can be the matter with you?’

Penruddocke turned upon her with a look of agony—agony that must not disclose its own secret--and even the vigorous-minded old woman gazed at him, speechless with wonder and fear.

But just at this moment, when perhaps some discovery might have been made, either through Penruddocke's reckless excitement or Miss Crow's penetration, the whole scene was suddenly changed.

CHAPTER V.

A GREATER DISCLOSURE.

‘MR. MOLTON,’ cried a servant, throwing the door open.

To Miss Crow, perplexed and agitated as she was by Penruddocke’s mysterious behaviour, the opportunity of breaking into a passion seemed rather a relief than a vexation. She wheeled round upon her servant with flashing eyes.

‘I told you to admit nobody. Bid this person, whoever he is, to write about his business, if he has any business with me. Show him down stairs.’

The stranger, who had advanced into the

middle of the room, was a small man, of slender build and delicate features. His silver-grey hair was arranged with the utmost care, and his look and bearing were those of a gentleman, who by reason of particular refinement of nature, is more than a gentleman. He did not seem the least daunted by the unusual reception he met, and even smiled to himself, in a way which showed that he made allowance for Miss Crow's violence, as a bit of ill-breeding, which must be attributed to eccentricity, and forgiven on account of its origin.

‘Don't scold your servant,’ said the stranger, with this easy mildness of manner, which was very surprising, in the face of the fury of the mistress of the house. ‘He wished to obey your orders, but I persuaded him to the contrary. It was necessary I should see you at once, and I am sure you

will be the first to confess this when you learn my business.'

'I suppose,' said Miss Crow, dealing one of her savage looks at the intruder, 'you are the honorary secretary of a missionary society, calling for subscriptions. Such persons generally choose the most unsuitable hours, and they always plead the most urgent necessity.'

'My business is private,' the stranger replied.

'Private!' cried Miss Crow, snapping at the word. 'Then I suppose you are come to beg on your own account.'

'My way of finding access to you might suggest as much,' the other said, with an unconquerable smoothness of manner which only exasperated the old woman still more. 'But I am not come to ask alms. You know Miss Travis?' he said, changing his tone.

‘Yes, I know her,’ answered Miss Crow.
‘What have you to say to her?’

‘I wish to learn if you have heard anything of her during the last ten days,’ replied the visitor.

‘And may I inquire,’ retorted Miss Crow, ‘by what right you put any question to me about Miss Travis, good or bad?’

‘Certainly,’ the other answered; ‘it is very natural for you to wish to know. I am her guardian. And now, I suppose, I may ask if she is in your house?’

‘She is not,’ replied Miss Crow, with the least possible softening of manner. ‘But I expect her every moment. You cannot see her this night, however, if you were her guardian twenty times over,’ and as she said this she grew vicious again. In vain she tried to provoke her visitor. He appeared

wholly intent on his business and insensible of her rudeness.

‘Are you quite sure that Miss Travis will be here to-night?’ he asked again. ‘When did you see her last?’

‘Six weeks ago.’

‘And when did you hear from her last?’

‘A fortnight ago.’

‘In that case,’ said Mr. Molton, shaking his head, ‘I am afraid you must not expect to see her to-night. You know as little as I do. Miss Travis has suddenly disappeared from Riverhead, and there is at present no trace of her whereabouts. I have not been at home, for I have had to go from place to place, and could not even give an address for my letters, as my movements from day to day were uncertain. This morning I found, at my club in London, a letter from the woman who has had a kind of charge of Miss Travis,

telling me that she ran out of the house suddenly one night, about a fortnight ago, and has not been heard of since. This letter is ten days old, and I have no later news, but on my way home, I thought I would call here, for I knew of your kindness, and hoped that you might have some tidings of her.'

The old woman's manner changed as she heard this explanation, and in genuine alarm she begged her visitor to be seated. Penruddocke, more dead than alive, listened for what should follow, and scarcely drew his breath.

'I want to know,' said Mr. Molton, addressing Miss Crow in a more familiar way, 'can you at all explain this disappearance? Is not Miss Travis in love with a young man of your acquaintance?'

'She is,' Miss Crow answered, 'and they are to be married immediately.'

‘Humph,’ said Mr. Molton in a dry way. Then, as if that matter were not worth disputing at present, he continued : ‘Have you any reason to suspect that her flight is at all connected with this affair?’

Miss Crow turned round to speak to Penruddocke, and then, struck by a sudden thought, changed her mind, and simply answered, ‘No.’

‘You are quite sure?’ persisted Mr. Molton.

‘I am,’ Miss Crow replied. ‘Mercy knew little about the affair, although she had given her affections away irrevocably to my young friend. She did not hope to marry him, in fact, and nothing connected with him could possibly have affected her conduct in any way at the present time. The truth is, the young man is wealthy, and her superior in rank, and she did not and could not know

that, through the kindness of an excellent relative, who lives in France, every difficulty in the way of this marriage had been overcome.'

'The young man's name is Bolton, is it not?' inquired Mr. Molton.

'That is the name,' replied Miss Crow; and Penruddocke thought she would certainly introduce him, but she did not.

'There is a fact in Miss Travis' private history that ought to be known before such a marriage is arranged,' said the guardian gravely. 'You see I know—and I alone know—the whole history of the girl.'

'I know what you would say,' cried Miss Crow, giving one doubtful glance at Penruddocke, and then deciding to speak on freely. 'There is a blot on her name. She is not what is called a legitimate child. That is a misfortune, but it cannot affect her spotless

nature. The man who is to marry her will love her more, not less, for a fault of circumstance so amply atoned for by charms of character.'

'Your sentiment is a noble one,' said her visitor with a slight bow, 'but you quite misunderstand me, and the facts of her life also. Miss Travis is a lady by birth and by legal right. That is not the secret I spoke of.'

'What is it, then?' asked Miss Crow, growing impatient.

'Her name is not Travis.'

'That I know as well as you do.'

'Her real name you cannot know, however,' said Mr. Molton, 'and it is important you should know it, especially on account of your young friend, who is nearly related to her.'

'Related to her!' cried Miss Crow, gazing at her visitor in blank wonder. 'That is

impossible—wholly impossible. I know the family well, and have known them for years. There is not a girl of their blood living, that is to say——’

Here Miss Crow paused, like one upon whom an idea, utterly new and unforeseen, suddenly breaks. She stood with lips that moved, but no speech came from them.

‘Mercy Travis is the daughter of the Reverend Death Bolton, and the first cousin of the young man whom it is proposed she should marry,’ said Mr. Molton.

At the mention of Death Bolton, Miss Crow fell back in her chair, and looked at her visitor with the stare of a maniac; her eyes were dilated and all her great teeth showed. She remained in this attitude for an instant, and then, as if the full force of his announcement had not until now made itself felt, she broke into a long, piercing scream,

which did not end all at once, but was renewed again and again, her face all the while being convulsed with terror, rage, and amazement. Penruddocke and Molton were horrified, and each rose from his seat to give her some assistance, but before this could be done her shriek rose to a note of piercing height and intensity, and she fell backward in a fit, her features, body, and limbs working like those of an epileptic. Then motion ceased, and she lay before them, rigid and quite unconscious.

All was excitement. Penruddocke raised the old woman from the floor upon which she had rolled, and lifted her to the sofa, while Mr. Molton rang the bell for help. Hercules, who had turned very pale, groped his way from the fireside, and tried to find out what had happened, but the others were too busy to answer his questions. Miss Crow's maid at

last appeared, but she was new to her place, and timid, and could give very little help ; and amidst all the confusion the mistress of the house lay unconscious, her face deathly white, and the only sign of life about her being a laboured stertorous breathing, of prodigious noise and volume.

Her head was thrown backward, and, compared with her ordinary posture, her face might have been described as turned upside down. Those who looked at her in her every-day attitudes got a downward view of her features, from the temple to the chin, and now her chin was uppermost, and her face sloped backwards. Penruddocke remarked to himself, as he looked at her, that the change was so complete, that had he been suddenly brought before her, as she lay here, he would never have known her to be Miss Crow. The nostrils were wide, and almost hideous ;

the shape of the mouth was changed ; and the face, instead of seeming as it used to do, was large and flat, and indescribably ugly. Penruddocke felt that he might faint himself under this sudden and horrible transformation which made the foregoing surprises insignificant. He managed, however, to tell his father in a few whispers who Molton was, and the tidings he had brought, and the effect these had upon Miss Crow. Hercules, who remembered Molton well enough at his brother's bedside, understood at once what was told him, but something troubled him, which Penruddocke did not understand.

‘ Where is Mr. Molton ? ’ asked Hercules. ‘ Bring me to him ; let me have a private word with him.’

Penruddocke led him a few steps and put his hand into Molton's. The latter

scarcely noticed the act, for he was gazing at Miss Crow like one fascinated.

‘Why did this old woman faint?’ asked Hercules, bending his head until he touched Molton’s cheek, and speaking in a very low, anxious voice.

Molton looked up.

‘You are Death Bolton’s brother, are you not?’ he said, for until now he had not looked at Hercules.

‘I am,’ replied Hercules impatiently. ‘Do tell me : why did the old woman faint ? Has she come to yet ?’

‘Do you know who this lady is?’ inquired Molton, his eyes fixed on the white, senseless face.

‘A friend of my sister,’ answered Hercules. ‘So she has always said.’

‘This is your sister herself,’ replied Molton. ‘Never were two faces cast in that mould.’

This is Miss Diana Bolton, if such a person ever lived.'

'Is she coming to?' whispered Hercules, not so much astonished as Molton thought he would be. 'Is she coming to? Take care she does not hear what we say. Yes; I have been suspecting something this half-hour, but, for God's sake, take care she does not hear what we say. You don't know her. Diana can see with her eyes shut, and hear through stone walls, and I dare say she may understand what goes on about her, even while she seems unconscious. If it is Diana—if it is Diana. Oh, but it would be like her to play such a trick. But don't let her know that we have found her out, or I shall die a beggar. Perhaps it is not Diana,' he added, as if a new idea struck him. 'Perhaps it is not Diana. We had better think it is not Diana.'

‘Had your sister any mark by which she could be recognised now?’ Molton asked, with eyes still fixed on the prostrate old lady.

‘She had a mole right under her chin,’ Hercules answered; and then he added clumsily, ‘no; I forgot: it was not she had the mole—it was not she.’

But this was too ill-disguised an amendment to deceive Molton, who saw that Hercules had unguardedly told the truth. He stooped down and looked more closely at Miss Crow’s face: there was a small mole right under the chin. And as he was bending over her, suddenly her consciousness returned, and she opened her eyes with another cry—a yell of rage—and raising herself on her right hand looked round from face to face with the utmost fury.

CHAPTER VI.

A DARK DAYBREAK.

MERCY, whose brain was not wanting in contrivance, had made her arrangements for hiding herself from Penruddocke with no little skill. A village lay about eight miles from Riverhead, which she had visited several times, both on account of its scenery, and also because the road to it ran along the coast, and was generally swept by a reviving sea-breeze. There was a small inn in the place, and here, on one of her visits, she lunched ; and as it was an idle time, the landlady sat with her during the meal, and Mercy, being solitary, made a friend of her. To this

village, and to this inn, she now resolved to go, for here she could remain in safety until she thought proper to communicate with Trip, and return to Uphill. She felt a weakness still lingering about her, but did not doubt that she could walk the distance, and walking was indeed the only sure way of eluding pursuit. As to why she came there at all at such an hour—a point on which her friend the landlady was likely to be curious—she could invent some innocent fiction by the way.

It must not be supposed that the instant she ran out of the house her mind became composed, or her resolution inflexible. Many times she was on the point of flying back—into Pen's arms—and nothing but her truly devoted love hindered her from yielding to the impulse. Amidst the whirl and tempest of her thoughts she ever remembered that marriage with her would be his worldly ruin,

and by nursing this conviction she was able to force her feet to move onwards, though at every step the attraction behind seemed to pull more furiously. But she held on bravely, and at last she left the outmost house in the village behind ; a light from one of the windows shone for a moment on the road, and then nothing but silence and darkness lay before her.

The road plunged into a deep valley, until it reached a turnpike gate, where all was dark and still ; and Mercy, gliding swiftly by the silent house—for here she thought inquiries might be made in case she should be pursued—began to toil up the now ascending road. She could hear the waves dashing upon the shore in a little bay close at hand, and the sound coming through the night filled her with an indescribable fear and sorrow. Once more the thought of Pen, and flight with him,

and all the joys of mutual love, rushed upon her. But she struggled onward for nearly half a mile, until the sea lay far below and the voice of the waves was lost.

At this moment she felt a drop of rain upon her cheek, like a silent monitor, rebuking her folly for starting on such a journey. What if a storm should begin? Where could she shelter? And, when she reached her destination, how could she reasonably account to her friend the landlady for arriving so late, and amidst wind and rain? While she thought upon this, she heard the wind moaning in the distance, and at the same moment the rain began to fall in earnest; the sky was black, and everything betokened the approach of a storm. And now Mercy began to ask herself, with no small anxiety, what she must do. She felt that the wind was rising, and as to the rain, there could be no

doubt that it was such as would wet her to the skin in a very short time. In this predicament she bethought herself of a hut, which stood on the wayside a little farther on, being intended for the use of some labourers, who were at work on the road. It was a miserable place enough, but it offered a shelter from the storm, and she remembered that there was a rough sort of seat in it. Forward she hurried as the rain fell faster, and now her great fear was that she might find even this poor place of refuge locked against her. Fortunately this was not the case. Indeed, the hut had been abandoned for some time, and was without a door of any kind, but it was a covering, and she crept into the shelter thankfully.

Every moment the storm grew wilder, and before she had spent ten minutes in this retreat she found herself meditating the

prudence, and the possibility, of staying there all night if the weather did not improve. She was not likely to be disturbed, for the road was unfrequented, and, indeed, had any one passed by she was safe from observation, unless, struck by her own thought, they should fly to the hut for shelter. This was not very likely, and Mercy concluded that the place was hers until morning, if she wished. The night was not cold for the time of year, and she was warmly clad. Besides, heated as she was with exercise, and wholly indisposed for sleep, the prospect of a night in the hut was not so dismal as might have been expected. The seat was not uncomfortable, and Mercy found that she could rest her feet upon it, and get a rude but not unkindly support for her head from the wall behind her. So she drew her clothes around her, and tucked her feet under her cloak, and being of a contented

mind, and used to plain accommodation, she began to feel on surprisingly good terms with her lodgings.

Outside the storm raged furiously, and Mercy could hear the waves rising and roaring hoarsely far below, while the rain beat heavily overhead. She began to think that she would be weather-bound for the rest of the night, but instead of grumbling or turning coward, she rather thought to herself how much worse things might have been, and took comfort. All at once a thrill of unexpected pleasure shot through her. She put her hand into her pocket, and felt something which at first she did not recognise. It was Pen's letter. She drew it forth and kissed it passionately. Dear silent messenger from him her soul loved! She did not feel half so lonely with this precious letter between her fingers, and there was a kind

of delightful excitement in thinking that when morning dawned she would have her darling's words to read by the earliest ray. How she loved him just then ! What passionate words she poured from her pure heart ! but the wind caught them from her lips and whirled them wildly away into the black tempest. No matter ! There was a warmth and a joy in her breast which defied the elements. She began to feel very tranquil. She had done right, she knew, and would not God bless her ? All might be well at last ! She reflected on Miss Crow's kindness, and her undoubted influence with Miss Diana Bolton. Perhaps Heaven would make her happy yet. Poor Mercy felt a warm delight stealing over her which defied the roaring of the dark skies ; and now she remembered that it was night, and said her prayers, which seemed to have a new meaning in that lonely spot. So

she sat on hour after hour, as she thought, for there was no means of registering the time that passed ; only she was full of memories and imaginations, and not fearful nor unhappy, nor, what might seem more surprising, did she even feel cold. At last, after a very long time, during which the rain showed no sign of abating, she fell asleep ; and it is a fact, that in this wretched shanty, and with the storm howling round her, the young girl passed into as tranquil a slumber as she had ever known, even in the sumptuous bed-chamber of Miss Crow. Wearied with the intense mental conflict of the day, she did not awake for some hours, not indeed until the borders of the sky were whitening in the dawn. Her first thought was one of relief, for the night was over without her having known it. Her next was that she might have caught her death of cold, for her limbs were stiff, and there seemed to be no

heat in her body. But her third thought—and it brought her to life more than the others—was Pen's letter! She tore it open with her numb fingers, and tried to read it, but as yet the light was too dim even to trace the lines. The rain had ceased, and the wind was still, so she rose and left her hiding place, and began to pursue her journey along the miry road. All she thought of was the coming morning light, and Pen's letter. Thrice she tried to decipher it, and thrice the light refused to serve her, upon which she thought to herself that to spell it out word after word would spoil her pleasure, so she resolved to walk on, and look at it no more until she could read it freely.

The tardy dawn could not much longer leave its task unfinished, and at last Mercy stopped, and with a beating heart began to read her letter. Little did she guess what a

disclosure was in store for her. The letter began *Dear Detmar*, but Mercy, in her wonder, read the greater part without ever asking herself if it was lawful to look at what had been written to another. The letter ran thus :

‘ Dear Detmar,—You and circumstances have triumphed. Miss Crow has asked me to meet my intended at dinner in a few days’ time. Before then my affair with M. T. must be consummated. Luckily or unluckily—I don’t know which—I have prepared her mind, and she will fly with me whenever I ask her. She had scruples about marrying at a registrar’s office, but these I have overcome, and as to any suspicion on her part—unless some very open blunder is committed by your agent—you may dismiss that fear from your mind. Her confidence in me is so implicit that the idea of a fictitious ceremony

would never enter her head, unless there were some incredible stupidity in carrying out the arrangements. I suppose most people would call me a villain, but what am I to do? I love the girl to distraction, and yet if I really married her, I should be a beggar, as you say, and she a beggar too. If worst comes to worst I can marry her at some future day, and defy my aunt; and even if I am at last forced to marry the person whom my aunt has chosen, I can make Mercy comfortable for the rest of her life. Three or four hundred a year would be nothing to me, and would be a fortune to her; and after all she will not have sullied the purity of her conscience, for in her mind and thought she will be my wife as truly as if we were really married. Thus I repeat my old reasonings to myself again and again, and still I don't feel happy. But I am desperate, and when

I think of her as my own—on any terms—my head swims with delight, and I count the hours, the minutes, that divide me from that day of days. She must pay the penalty of being beautiful and enticing beyond all description. She has led me to an act which I know is dishonourable, but whether she ever becomes my wife or not, she shall be my heart's delight for ever. There, I need say no more. Monday, at eight o'clock in the morning. Of course you will not appear. Ever yours, P. B.'

Mercy stood fixed like a statue in the open road while she read this letter, not once, or twice, but half a score of times. At first she did not perceive what the words implied, and it was only as she read it again and again that, now one sentence, and now another, emerged from obscurity, and took its place with the rest as part of a coherent whole.

At last the bare fact of the case stood before her in all its incredible hideousness, and her reason almost gave way. Who, but persons who have known it, can measure the shock which is felt by those who, having identified one being with all their ideas of faith and truth, suddenly discover that the object of their worship is nothing, if not unfaithful and untrue? The moral world has its earthquakes, like the natural world. Mercy felt that the ground on which she had been standing had given way and disappeared. She was engulfed in darkness and chaos. She did not scream, nor cry, but with her eyes stonily fixed on the ground she said aloud—

‘Pity me—pity me, O my God.’

CHAPTER VII.

A NEW FRIEND.

‘YOUR prayer is heard,’ said a strong and serious voice at her side.

Mercy looked up. A woman stood beside her dressed in a long water-proof cloak which covered her from head to feet, and wearing a plain black straw hat, which, however, was of a cut so elegant that this one article of dress alone would have fixed the wearer’s station in society. The stranger was tall, and held herself with a vigour and dignity which were almost amazonian ; and her face, though very worn, was still remarkably handsome. Her hair was turning grey, but not with time,

for she was still in the prime of life, and her aspect was that of one who had fought a fight with trouble, and come away wounded, but unconquered in spirit. She looked at Mercy for a little space with an almost imperious gaze, as if she had a perfect right to scrutinise her and know all about her, but the girl's distressed face softened her, and a gentleness passed over her features, a kind expression of concern and interest which at once showed that her curiosity was not of the hard-hearted sort which comes, and looks, and satisfies itself, and then passes by on the other side.

‘What is your sorrow?’ she asked kindly.

‘Why are you here at such an hour?’

‘Don't ask me, ma'am,’ replied Mercy, waving her questioner aside by an unconscious motion of the hand. ‘Let me go my way. I cannot speak to anyone.’

She would have walked on, but the

stranger, with an air of authority, stopped her by putting a hand on each shoulder :

‘ My girl,’ she said, gazing into Mercy’s face with eyes that seemed to read her soul, ‘ have you had a disappointment in love ? ’ Mercy tried to answer, but her lips, already trembling before the coming outburst of sorrow, would not obey her.

‘ Was it a great trouble ? ’ the stranger asked again, and Mercy saw that the eyes which looked so stern were moistening as she spoke, and this little token of sympathy was quite enough to turn the trembling balance of the girl’s feelings. She felt that the stranger was kind, and without another word threw herself upon her breast, and let her grief have vent. The other did not speak, but put one arm around the weeping girl and with the other caressed her, as if she had been a wounded bird.

When the first violence of Mercy's grief had spent itself, the stranger raised her drooped head, and gazed steadfastly into her face. After this scrutiny, which was not by any means brief, she nodded signifying assent, as it seemed, to some unspoken thought.

'Come with me,' she said, passing her arm round Mercy's waist, and urging her forward.

'I cannot, ma'am—I cannot,' cried Mercy. 'I must go on by myself.'

'Have you a home to go to?' inquired the other, fixing her searching grey eyes on Mercy. 'Or are you flying in distraction, you don't know where?'

Her calm, authoritative manner began to influence the young girl, and there was less resistance in Mercy's voice as, loosening her imprisoned arm, and beating one clenched hand into the open palm of the other with a

regular stroke, which showed she was unconscious of the act, she cried—

‘I am distracted! I am going mad—I know I am going mad!’

‘Come with me then,’ the stranger repeated; and this time Mercy obeyed her, and the two walked silently forward together. After they had gone a hundred yards Mercy’s companion pointed up a narrow lane, which seemed like a farm road, and but little used, and Mercy without a word took this path with her new companion. They passed through three gates, and then turned into a field where a footpath was faintly visible upon the grass. This led to another gate which opened into a large yard at the rear of what appeared to be a comfortable cottage, and the next minute Mercy found herself in a bright clean-looking kitchen where a cheerful fire danced in some score of well-

polished-pieces of tinware, which hung in good order round the walls. A homely, peasant-like servant was in the act of pouring water from a kettle—which shone like everything else—into a dainty china teapot. The woman stopped, and stood, kettle in hand, looking in wonder at the new-comer.

‘I have asked this young lady to breakfast,’ said her mistress laconically ; ‘let us have it soon. Follow me, my dear.’ She added the last words to encourage Mercy, who was the image of speechless misery.

The arrested stream from the kettle began to flow again, and the strange lady led the way through a narrow passage, and up a steep flight of stairs into a bedroom. This room was furnished with the utmost neatness, but the floor was bare, and neither pictures nor ornaments were to be seen anywhere,

except a crucifix which hung over the chimney-piece. The furniture, though plain, was handsome, and arranged in good taste, and the curtains and quilt were as white as snow. Even in her wretchedness Mercy noticed the striking and exquisite simplicity of the whole room. It was the apartment of one who was first a lady and then an anchoress.

‘You must lie down and rest for a few minutes,’ said the stranger, drawing Mercy to the bedside, and unfastening her cloak at the same time. ‘Ten minutes’ rest, and then you shall have some breakfast.’

Mercy obeyed her, and sank quietly down. She was half conscious of a hand busy unfastening her boots, and then as she lay with closed eyes she felt as if the bed were spinning round and round with incredible velocity. She said to herself, without any feeling of alarm or discomfort, that this must

be another of the vagaries of her sensitive brain, after which the sense of motion ceased, and with it the sense of all outward things.

Mercy awoke in a state of clear and connected consciousness, and even, as she opened her eyes, remembered the room, and how she came there. But to her surprise she saw that it was evening, and that a fire was burning in the grate. Her new friend stood at the foot of the bed, looking at her.

‘What a sleep I must have had,’ said Mercy; and when she began to speak she found her voice no better than a whisper, and she became conscious of a weakness which was diffused through her whole frame—not a deadly weakness, but a pleasing languor, which bid her rest on, and neither move nor open her lips. The latter suggestion, however, she did not obey.

‘It has been a long sleep,’ she repeated

languidly, 'from morning until evening, I suppose.'

'You have slept long and well,' said the lady. 'Thank God for it. He giveth His beloved sleep.'

Mercy, who was by nature disposed to the frankest and most spontaneous devotion, closed her eyes at these words. The lady's voice was almost masculine in depth, but of great richness, and her speech had a solemn sound.

It was strange that Mercy had no inclination to say anything more, nor did she feel the slightest curiosity about her situation. She turned on her side, and fell into the gentlest sleep imaginable, and slumbered on quietly, until she awoke at the sound of a bell. Her friend was now seated beside the fire, and the room was dark, except where the flames cast their transitory light.

‘What bell is that?’ Mercy asked.

‘The bell for evening prayer,’ the lady answered.

‘Evening prayer!’ exclaimed Mercy.
‘Why, what day is this?’

‘Sunday,’ replied her friend, rising and walking across the dark room to her bedside.

‘Sunday!’ repeated the amazed Mercy. And then she asked—‘Have I been out of my senses, ma’am?’

‘You have been sleeping a great deal,’ the lady answered.

‘Sleeping!’ said Mercy. ‘Sleeping for a whole week!’

‘For many—many days,’ replied the other. ‘But you must be still, and ask no questions now.’

‘And have you been taking care of me?’ Mercy inquired in spite of this command.

‘I have,’ the lady answered. ‘And my

care is now that you shall speak no more to-night. You must sleep, if you can, but if you cannot, let your mind be at rest. You are with a friend. There is nothing to make you anxious. Do as I bid you. Sleep if you can, but at least be at rest.'

Mercy closed her eyes obediently, and tempted by a deep but not unpleasing languor she sank to sleep again. Upon awakening—at what hour of the night she knew not, and did not care to guess—she saw her friend standing beside her, in a loose gown, fastened with a girdle round the waist. Her long hair fell over her shoulders, and in this easy attire the singular grace of her figure and energy of her carriage were more conspicuous than ever. She looked a sort of tragedy queen.

But a little table at the side of the bed declared her connection with common life. A

cup of tea stood upon it, and a few dainty fingers of toast.

‘It is time for you to eat a little,’ she said.
‘But you must not try to talk until you are stronger.’

And the little meal was eaten in silence, and Mercy was left alone again.

CHAPTER VIII.

LEARNING HOW TO SUFFER.

SLEEP, however, was over for Mercy, and when by herself she began to review the immediate past. Her school—the vicar—her old companion Trip—rushed into her mind. Then came the thought of Penruddocke, and that broken dream, and all beside vanished.

At first she was inclined to think the letter a fantasy, forged by her own overwrought mind, but this notion could not last long, and as she lay thinking, the incidents of that memorable day and night spontaneously reappeared in their proper order and with unmistakable reality. When she remembered

what had happened, and how Penruddocke had unveiled his true character, her feelings vibrated between sorrow and disgust. Mercy, amidst all her sweetness of disposition, had a clear judgment and a firm will. She felt that there must be in Penruddocke's nature a deep-seated baseness, and she would not suffer her love for him to confuse her opinion of his character. That he was not indelibly a villain she felt convinced, and that there was something amiable as well as graceful about him she still believed. But he was her Penruddocke no more. She would not have married him if he had been able to offer her half an empire.

Her idol had indeed turned to clay. She saw that; but the disgust she felt for him, and the shame with which she reflected upon her own passion for a man so intrinsically worthless, did not mitigate her grief at this

tremendous disappointment. Womanly vanity, unconscious elation at winning the love of a man so greatly her superior, did perhaps fan the flame of her love for Penruddocke, but the flame itself was pure. Could she at this moment have been persuaded that Pen was what she once believed him to be, and had she been told at the same time that she must never see him on earth again, the joy would have been greater far than the grief. To lose Penruddocke would have been bitter enough, but to discover that he never had existed at all—that the man to whom she had given her love was only an effigy—this conviction gave her a sensation of emptiness and heartache which was intolerable. He had indeed drawn nigh unto her with his lips, but oh, how far was his heart from hers! she tearing out the tenderest threads and fibres of her affections rather than injure him, and he setting

a trap for her innocence, even while his vows of devotion were being murmured in her ears!

‘You have been lying awake,’ her new friend remarked, when she came into her room in the morning. ‘Lying awake—and crying too, I see.’

Mercy coloured faintly.

‘I have been thinking about—about my friends,’ she said. ‘They must wonder what has become of me.’

‘Your friends know that you are safe,’ replied the other.

‘Has Mrs. Trip heard of me?’ inquired Mercy.

‘She has.’

‘And the vicar?’

‘He has been written to.’

‘But,’ said Mercy, awakening to the surprising nature of this reply, ‘how did you know my friends?’

‘I know all about you,’ her friend answered, seeming to enjoy the possession of this mysterious information, for she smiled as she spoke. ‘Some day I shall tell you how I came to know you, but not yet. Why have you been crying?’

‘Don’t ask me,’ pleaded poor Mercy—
‘oh, if you please, don’t ask me!’

‘Why have you been crying?’

‘Because—because—’ said Mercy, looking piteously this way and that, seeking for an excuse, and at last giving way to an honest outburst of grief, ‘because I want to die, and forget, and be forgotten.’

‘Child,’ was the grave reply, ‘you must moderate your grief. The fashion of this world passeth away. We shall soon enter an eternal state.’

‘I don’t feel as if I wanted an eternal state,’ answered Mercy. ‘I only want to forget and to sleep, and never awake again.’

‘Poor girl! poor girl!’ said the lady, stroking her hair kindly, ‘you have not been long in the school of sorrow.’

This short dialogue was the key-note of many conversations, in which Mercy expressed much the same feelings, while her friend, by various methods, tried to restore her to a more tranquil frame of mind. It was curious that Mercy never confessed the cause of her sorrow, and more remarkable that her friend made no inquiries about it. At last—on the Sunday after Mercy recovered her consciousness—as they were talking upon this subject, Mercy with vehemence declared that she had lost all care for life and for happiness, and even for duty. Upon hearing this announcement Mrs. Daintree—this was the lady’s name—looked at her young companion seriously for a while, and then said—

‘Would you like to hear the story of my life?’

‘Oh, tell it to me, if you please,’ cried Mercy, more, however, with the hope of suspending the discussion than from any particular curiosity.

‘Lie still then,’ said Mrs. Daintree, ‘and when you are tired let me know.’

The story of Margaret Daintree.

My father’s name was Cumberland, and he was a colonel in the army. I was his only child, and my mother died before I was old enough to remember her. When I was eighteen my father received into his house his own sister, who had lately become a widow, and who pressed herself upon him as manager of his household and director of his affairs. From that hour my life was miserable. I am now quite able to see that my

own hot temper and ungovernable will contributed in no small degree to my unhappiness, but a portion of the blame certainly lay with my aunt. She in the most irritating and preposterous way treated me as a rival in my father's affections and good opinions, and every kindness he showed me, nay, every common remark he addressed to me, she persisted in regarding as a slight to herself; while, if I but smiled at him, she flew into transports of rage. I was spirited and wilful, she was morose and jealous, and for several years we led a life of such constant and bitter warfare as is seldom known, even among divided families. Our perpetual quarrels wearied my father, and, unfortunately for me, he sided with my aunt, and I could perceive that his manner towards myself became colder every day. At this time my aunt conceived the idea of marrying me to a gentle-

man in the neighbourhood, and I was not long in discovering that my father was favourable to the scheme. Had the man been an Adonis the favour of my aunt would have made him odious in my sight ; but, in point of fact, he was old, ugly, and a hard drinker. The only points in his favour were his large fortune and his family, which was old enough to have sent several generations of hard-living ancestors drunk to the grave. He was flattered at the idea of securing as a wife a young woman, and one who had a reputation for beauty, and before I fully realised the situation he made a proposal to me. I rejected him at once, and I think in no very gentle terms, upon which my aunt's anger became almost diabolical. My father, however, insisted that I should be left free in the matter ; and, though he did not disguise his vexation at my conduct, would not allow me

to be coerced. Perhaps he foresaw the danger to which such a course might lead. My life, however, grew more miserable every day, and when a spontaneous suitor for my hand appeared, I was in no mood to ask many questions concerning him.

How shall I describe that man? The intoxication and the bane of my life! Tall, of a figure the most symmetrical I ever saw, with wavy black hair which disposed itself in the most graceful way, grey eyes, a nose of the finest shape, and a mouth—oh, what a mouth!—how many a kiss I have sealed upon it! His hands and feet were beautifully shaped, and his bodily strength was prodigious, enabling him to go through all sorts of manly exercises with a dare-devil ease which alone was enough to make a woman love him. His mental powers were, indeed, not remarkable; and he was vain and boastful in his

talk ; and would relate long stories of wonders he had done, which were utterly without foundation. But this contemptible quality I did not perceive until I became his wife.

He was an only son, with a large patrimony, and the connection was one which, in a worldly point of view, left little to be desired. My father now began to applaud my prudence in having refused the former offer, and even my aunt was partially reconciled to me, in the prospect of a speedy separation. The common forms of courtship were hurried over, the wedding-day fixed, and I found myself married before I had asked myself, ‘Is it my heart or my vanity which has been conquered?’

Why my husband ever sought my hand is a mystery which I have not explained to myself even to this hour. Before our honeymoon was over I felt convinced that I was

not altogether to his liking, and from that hour my misery recommenced, in a new and more terrible form. Now for the first time did I perceive the faults of his character. He was unfeeling, vain-glorious, ill-educated, and utterly untruthful; my heart began to sink, as day after day disclosed some new feature in his character of an evil or ungracious kind. But I contrived to persuade myself that he had been soured by the disappointment which I plainly saw he had met with in his marriage, and that I was the cause of faults which (as I might have seen had I not been wilfully blind) were in fact permanent defects in his nature. Will you believe it?—nay, is not this like our sex?—I grew fonder of him every day. He had the one quality, against which no woman can quite steel her heart, manly beauty; and as I walked or drove at his side, I could not but

look at him with pride, and I am afraid that sometimes, as I thought of myself, I fancied—oh, with what a rush of pleasure—that I was no unworthy partner of so handsome a man. Do not smile at this. Seven years ago I was not the grey worn woman you see before you to-day.

‘I did not smile,’ said Mercy; ‘you are handsome enough now to win any man’s love.’

Mrs. Daintree sighed, but did not seem displeased, and she stroked Mercy’s hand as she went on :

I extenuated his faults. I was resolved to love him, and would see no evil in him. The blemishes, against which I could not shut my eyes, I persisted in regarding as the results of an unhappy marriage; and I resolved that I would secure his affection at last, and repay him for his loss of delight in those

earlier days of married life. And how I strove to minister to his pleasure and to gain his affection. For three years, in the face of indifference, and ingratitude, and occasional cruelty, I maintained a smiling face, and was busy from morning to night brightening and adorning his life. If he wished for my society, he had it. If he chose to absent himself from home, I took care to greet him upon his return with cheerfulness and tenderness. When he was ill-natured, I was silent and submissive. When he was complaisant, I coaxed him to talk on the subjects he liked best. I am afraid I flattered him too, but what will not a woman do to secure a husband's love? Let this outline of my conduct suffice, without tedious minuteness: here you have in a few words the history of three anxious years, when too often I hid, by a smiling face, a heart that was sick unto

death. For, beyond a stray gleam of animal good-nature, I saw but little fruit of all my pains.

We were living at this time in the neighbourhood of Hampstead; and it happened that an uncle of mine, who was the last representative of an ancient baronetcy, came to town. He had always a partiality for me, and we saw a great deal of him. He was wealthy, and entertained with great splendour, and some of the best society of London met around his table. My husband, whose birth, though respectable, was inferior to my own, and who had that passion for what is called good society which we so often notice in those who have been brought up on the outskirts of fashion, was greatly delighted with this new connection. He was gratified with meeting persons of noble birth or distinguished position at the table of a relative; and as I

was prominent in all my uncle's entertainments, my husband had many opportunities of being proud of the position which I took in these choice assemblies. I perceived his manner growing warmer to me. He loaded me with superb presents, and no jewel was too costly if he thought it would make me look brilliant. He would even consider the style of my dresses, and say what colour or shape became me best. Oh, what tears of pleasure I shed in private over my victory, which I assured myself was already won !

At last a particular night came when my uncle gave a party ; chiefly to entertain a leading member of a ministry which had at that time just fallen from power. The party was a very distinguished one ; and my husband was immensely elated when he found that he was invited to it. He brought home that afternoon a superb set of diamonds,

and as he gave them to me he kissed me, which he had not done of his own accord for years. My heart swelled with triumph and joy, and perhaps in my pride I forgot to thank God for His mercy in giving me this foretaste of a blessing for which I had so earnestly prayed. I felt that the spirit of ten women was in me. I dressed myself with unusual care, even for me, who was then most solicitous at all times to look my best. As I took a parting glance into my mirror I realised that I was beautiful. My eyes were on fire with pride and pleasure ; my cheeks were painted with a colour which, whatever its source, vanity or affection, was charming to the eye. I felt that my hour of conquest was come, and I resolved that this night should crown the hopes of years.

I was not wholly disappointed. During the evening I was again and again conscious

that looks of admiration were turned upon me, and each time a new vivacity broke out in my conversation ; and although my manner was stately—for, indeed, I was in an imperial mood—yet the joy I felt must have infused a warmth, and grace, and pleasantry into all I said and did. At one time in the evening I came close to my uncle, who was conversing with his ministerial friend. This personage had evidently been struck by my appearance, for as I approached, unseen by him, his back being turned upon me, he said :—

‘ I should be proud of such a niece. The most captivating woman I ever met !’

‘ Take care,’ cried my uncle laughing, and laying his hand on my husband’s shoulder, for he formed a third in the group, ‘ this is Margaret’s husband. She has made one captive already, and that is enough for a prudent woman.’

I turned aside, and probably no one suspected that I had overheard the dialogue. But the next instant, as I glanced across the room towards my husband, I saw that he was looking at me with an admiration which was for him altogether new. At last I was victorious !

That night, as we drove home together, he turned to me, and pressing a true lover's kiss upon my shoulder, he murmured—
'Margaret, you are a beauty. Don't you know it ?'

There, let me draw a veil over a few happy weeks of life. How sunny they were ! How fast—how fast they fled away !

At this time the young widow of a colonial governor—who, with the common folly of old beaus, had made a May and December marriage, and died after a few months of dotage—came to live in Hampstead, and, as

she was a stranger, I thought it would be kind to call upon her. Our acquaintance ripened rapidly, and she became a constant guest at our house. She was a woman of considerable accomplishments, lively and versatile in her manners, and with an agreeable knowledge of the world in both hemispheres, which greatly enlivened her conversation. Without being a beauty she was decidedly good-looking, and her hair was remarkably fine, and dressed with exquisite care and taste. But, as every fascinating woman must have one charm of charms, she possessed a particular attraction, which, though singular, was undoubtedly potent. This was her walk, which was the most elegant I have ever seen. I loathe the memory of this woman—may God forgive me!—and certainly I am not likely to flatter her, but no one could see her walking in the street, or entering a room, without

being struck by the exquisite grace of movement, which never forsook her. She walked swiftly, but with the lightness of a nymph, and a graceful suppleness which I cannot compare to anything, for its like I never saw.

Why does God, in His mysterious providence, permit souls of the basest sort to lodge in frames of such enchanting grace? There is certainly no relation between beauty of body and beauty of soul in this world, and yet such is our idea of angels. We make our devils ugly : nature does not !

As time passed I fancied that a peculiar kind of familiarity began to appear in the manner of this woman towards my husband, and in his manner towards her. Instead of calling her 'Mrs. Arundel,' he would address her with some careless nickname, sometimes complimentary and sometimes laughable ;

while she, on her part, received these little freedoms with an ease which at first quite disarmed my suspicions. She became a more frequent visitor in our house than ever, and I soon perceived that when she was there my husband could very easily dispense with my company. Beyond this, however, nothing occurred to awaken any misgivings in my mind, and I began to reproach myself for having suspected unjustly, not only my husband, but my friend, for Mrs. Arundel professed great regard for me. But one day I entered the drawing-room abruptly, and saw my husband standing with his arm around this woman's neck, while he caressed her fondly on the cheek. He did not at first see me, but her eyes met mine directly, at the very moment when his fingers were playing on her face.

My husband, at the sound of my entrance,

hastily disengaged his arm, and I could see that he hoped they had not been detected. She, with an effrontery which I could not have believed possible, had I not seen it with my own eyes, advanced to meet me, and assuming an air of perfect composure, saluted me with a smile. Thunderstruck as I was, I thought I could read her design. There was a fiendish sneer on her face, as if she would say, 'Challenge me, and see which has more power over him, you or me.' The quickness of wit which helped me to read her mind also enabled me to frame my conduct at once. I greeted her coolly, and appearing as unembarrassed as herself, asked my husband if he thought of driving with us that afternoon. He answered like one in a dream, and seemed unable to credit his good fortune in having escaped detection. Mrs. Arundel's face blackened with a momentary frown of

disappointment, for she evidently was prepared for a scene ; but, for reasons of her own, she quickly decided to accept the part I assigned to her. We entered into conversation, and my husband soon recovered his spirits, though I could see him cast several anxious glances at me to assure himself that I had seen nothing. After an interval of the most artificial and preoccupied conversation which three persons can ever have maintained, Mrs. Arundel took her leave, bidding me farewell with an air of friendliness which almost led me to believe I had seen a vision. Then, with an easy kind of flirting nod to my husband, she disappeared. The moment she was out of sight, I burst into tears, and was hurrying from the room, when my husband stopped me, and asked in a tone of unusual softness what ailed me. Trembling with anger, and jealousy, and downright heart-

break, I threw myself on a sofa, and buried my face in my hands.

‘I see it all,’ said my husband, like one talking to himself. ‘This is jealousy. What a pity!’

‘Jealousy, Daniel!’ I cried, stung into fury, ‘and have I not a cause? If you saw me as I saw you just now, and were not jealous, I should despise you.’

‘It had an awkward look, I admit,’ said he.

He went on to say that Mrs. Arundel had been relating to him certain passages in the history of her life which were very pathetic, and that during the narrative she had exhibited a great deal of feeling. He had been led—it was unguarded, he admitted—to manifest a little extraordinary sympathy, by stroking her kindly on the cheek. That was

the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, upon his honour.

I was deceived, and not deceived. *Him* I believed—alas! who of our sex cannot be deceived by a man that she loves? As to Mrs. Arundel, I explained her conduct as the artifice of a coquette to allure my husband on to endearments which, whether or not they began in sympathy, would most likely end in another feeling. I hated and despised her from that hour, and irrevocably, but I blindly believed all that he had said about himself. How often the two must have laughed over my fond credulity! My blood boils at this moment to think of it.

Mrs. Daintree rose from her seat, and her manner showed that the fire of her nature was not altogether extinguished. But before a word farther escaped her lips, she checked herself, and sat down again :

My old enemy will break out, even now, she said, smiling sadly, but his power is departing. Let me go on with my story. You are too young, and too innocent, to have much experience in affairs like mine, and yet even you will think that I was very foolish in my conduct, after the discovery I had made. I will explain my motives. In the first place, I trusted my husband, and believed that he loved me. Then I despised my rival, for although her attractiveness was not to be questioned, yet I considered myself her superior in form and face, while in accomplishments and education she was insignificant beside me. I well remember one day dressing myself with the utmost care, and sitting down before my glass to weigh myself against Mrs. Arundel. Which of us, I asked myself, is most likely to win a man's affections? I recalled her and dressed her

out as daintily as memory or imagination enabled me, and tried to think of her in the full glory of brilliant glances and witty repartee, as I had so often seen her trying, by the most artful distribution of her favours, to detain as many of the men as she could around her. Then I saw myself—God forgive me—a tall, well-proportioned woman, in the bloom of health, and, as I thought, beauty. Proudly conscious I was that my charms of conversation were not those which require for a setting a blush, or a drooping glance, or a row of pearly teeth. I had received a good education, and my tastes had been carefully cultivated. I could hold my own when the talk ran upon political subjects. I prided myself on my knowledge of Church questions. History I had studied attentively, and I was not contemptible in general literature. French and German I wrote and spoke with the

fluency of natives, and I had a secret consciousness that I was not unfamiliar with Greek and Latin, though this fact for the most part I kept to myself, hating the idea of being thought blue. It was as a handsome woman I wished to shine—let all the rest be but smaller brilliants round the central charm. Indeed, such is the weakness of our sex, that I believe none of us, except those who are flatly and undoubtedly ugly, would care to be called clever first and handsome afterwards. The result of my self-examination—for to this I must return—was, I decided that my husband was safe in my keeping, and that Mrs. Arundel might do her worst. Vanity never beguiled itself into a more fatal conclusion, and so infatuated was I, that I actually allowed her to continue my friend in name and to be a constant visitor at my house ; nay, I even gave her opportunities of being

alone with my husband, the more to show her how lightly I esteemed her powers of captivation ! Madwoman that I was ! but let my fate warn other married women, who may be tempted to rate themselves too highly, and to despise their rivals. For several months all went on quietly, and I never noticed anything which was the least suspicious in the behaviour of my husband or Mrs. Arundel ; and not only my fears, but even my remembrance of the past, began to be effaced from my mind. Incredible as it may seem, I began to take an occasional pleasure in Mrs. Arundel's liveliness, though I still considered her a coquette and worthless at heart, and so six months passed away.

At the end of that time Mrs. Arundel went, as she pretended, on a visit to a friend in Paris. Just a week after she left, my husband as he was opening his letters at the

breakfast table one morning uttered an ejaculation of surprise, to which he immediately added another, expressive of vexation. Upon my asking what was the matter, he handed me a letter written in a vulgar hand, and signed in the name of the maid of his sole surviving aunt. This aunt, who had been for many years resident in Italy, was now about to return home, and indeed was already on her way, so the letter said, but had been seized with an alarming illness at Brussels. She wished my husband to come to her at once.

‘Only the fright of a fussy maid,’ said he, tossing the letter aside, as I gave it back to him. ‘Nothing is the matter with the old woman. Catch me going to Brussels on such an errand.’

Now this aunt was rich, and he was her favourite nephew, and I declared at once that

it was his duty to go to her. He affected to resist for a time, but at last suffered himself to be overruled by me, and that night he started for Brussels. For several days I heard nothing of him, but before I began to feel seriously apprehensive a letter came to me, not from Brussels but from Paris. Can I repeat calmly words which, as my eyes fell on them, appeared more appalling to me than the writing on the wall to Belshazzar? With merciless coolness he informed me, that though I had never been a woman after his mind, he had endured my society patiently and uncomplainingly for years. At last he had met 'a being' whom he could love. Each of them had tried to stifle their passion, but without success, and they had finally resolved to live together in a country where they could enjoy each other's companionship without fear and without reproach. 'As Milly is wealthy,' he

said, in conclusion, 'we have agreed that I can afford you an allowance of a thousand a year, which shall be paid quarterly to your order at my banker's, on the condition that you let us live in peace.'

My frenzy was unbounded. I could no more describe the successive fits of fury which swept through my mind—self-reproach, jealousy, hatred, shame—than I could depict the various waves which lash along this rocky coast in one of our winter storms. This only I say. If, as I paced my bedroom that night, a lion had been set upon me, as upon the martyrs of old, I think I would have enjoyed struggling with him to the death. I doubt if any pain or fear could have moved me while that first fury possessed me. What did I say? what did I think? what prayers, made up of blasphemy and defiance, did I fling at my Maker? I raved. I tore my hair. My lips

streamed with blood, as I bit them in my madness. At last I fainted away, and lay on my bed unconscious for hours.

My friends sympathised with me, of course, but their sympathy was more galling than contempt would have been. Let me pass over what immediately followed. I made up my mind to commit suicide.

Late one night I crept from my house unobserved. I had dressed myself in a set of garments which I had purchased for a poor woman in the neighbourhood, and my hope was that if my body were found—for I had resolved to drown myself in the river—no one would identify me, and my family would escape this additional disgrace. It was cold and misty as I hurried through the streets, but I scarcely saw or felt anything. I had taken a powerful dose of laudanum, and, except for my deadly purpose, my

senses were spread over by a film of insensibility. I even found myself trying to imagine the different persons who would commit suicide that night, and the ways of dying they would choose. Fear I had none. I flew onwards, ready in an instant, when I arrived at the spot, to leap into the water and make my fate irrevocable.

As I passed a public-house the glare of the lamps disclosed my features to a knot of dissolute young men who were just turning out of the door.

‘She’s a stunner!’ I heard one of them say, and the others laughed. After I had gone on a few paces the one who had spoken came after me.

‘Don’t hurry so fast, miss,’ said he. ‘What do you say to a bottle of wine and a dozen of oysters?’

I believe all I said before that day,

and all that was said to me, is quite blotted from my recollection, but these words and the man's face remain as real as life.

I looked at him for one moment, and something about him reminded me of my husband though this man's features were coarse and bloated. A sudden impulse of fury shot through me, and raising my hand I struck him a blow on the face, such as seldom, I believe, came from a woman. I saw him reel out in the road, where he staggered and fell right under a passing cab. I heard cries and oaths, and saw people running to the spot. But I was gone, fleeting into the darkness, and forgetting the incident, as if a moth had flown against my cheek.

I reached the bridge, and here I had the wit to moderate my pace, that I might not attract attention. But when I had got beyond the toll-gate and saw nobody near I

flew forward again. 'Five minutes more,' said I to myself, 'and I shall have done with earth and consciousness.' I went on as eagerly as one parched with insufferable thirst would rush to a cool clear fountain, and now in the centre of the bridge I was just about to climb the parapet. But the hand of God was over me. Close behind me there walked a woman whom I had not seen, but who must have been following me, no more noticing me, doubtless, than I had noticed her. All at once she passed before me and leaped on the wall, and with a wild scream of 'Good-bye all,' would have bounded into the river.

The effect upon me was wonderful. I seized her by the dress, and dragged her, still struggling, into the footway. I saw her face. She was a girl of seventeen or eighteen, and her features were pretty.

‘Let me go,’ she sobbed, as she wrestled with me. ‘If you are a woman, let me die and forget my misery.’

I looked in her face as I held her tightly, and then by God’s mercy my madness was healed. I clasped the girl to my heart, as a mother might clasp a lost child, and there, as I held her, I fell on her neck, and wept blessed, blessed tears, and thanked God that He had saved my soul, and the soul of the poor girl, who trembled and was already weeping too.

CHAPTER IX.

MARGARET DAINTREE.

AT this point Mercy burst into tears. She had listened to Mrs. Daintree's story with an excited interest which was too great a strain for her feeble strength, and her feelings at last overcame her.

'How thoughtless I have been,' exclaimed her friend. 'I have wearied you with my troubles.'

'No, I am not tired,' said Mercy, when she could speak. 'I am thinking of my own selfishness.'

'Selfishness !' exclaimed Mrs. Daintree.

'Yes, wicked selfishness,' cried Mercy,

vehemently. 'Here I have lain, day after day, crying over my sorrow, and saying that no one ever suffered like me, and wanting to die, though I had not, like you, the courage to kill myself. I wanted to be dead, which is just as bad.'

Mrs. Daintree smiled, and telling Mercy she was a good girl, bade her rest a while, promising, however, upon her earnest entreaty, to finish the story the same evening.

Mercy soon recovered her composure, and waited all the day for the hour when her friend was to come to her. At six o'clock Mrs. Daintree appeared, and after kissing Mercy with unusual affection, resumed her narrative :

I questioned the poor girl about her trouble. It was the old story, only painted in colours of innocence, villainy, and wretchedness, such as are seldom seen in

those cases. She had lost her honour, under circumstances which at once extenuated her own guilt—as far as that is possible—and made the crime of her deceiver more abominable. Stories like hers are not fit for you to hear, and I shall say no more about her, except that I was the means, not only of rescuing her from suicide, but of restoring her to virtue and happiness. She lived with me for three months, and now that girl, whom I saw white as a sheet, wasted, and spectral with misery, and plunging to everlasting destruction, is as plump, rosy, and cheerful a lass as you could find in all this county. Thank God, she was never really vicious. Her sin was accidental, and God mercifully permitted me, a miserable sinner, to be her earthly saviour. When I am closing my eyes in death I shall think of her,

and in spite of my own sorrows I shall bless God for my creation.

Mrs. Daintree spoke with a grave and self-collected emotion, and Mercy, who, as the reader must have already seen, was quick to feel, especially when any sentiments of love and goodness were set before her, caught her friend's hand, and kissed it almost reverently.

Need I say (continued Mrs. Daintree) that I rejected with scorn my husband's offer of an allowance? I replied to him, and told him that before I should degrade myself by accepting a shilling from his hands, I would die of hunger. I believe the letter I wrote was sufficiently severe to tincture his guilty pleasures with bitterness. He did not send any answer, and after a little consideration I accepted the offer of a cousin, who lives close at hand, to reside in this small house, which is on his estate. The

rector of this parish is an aged man, and too poor to employ a curate, and finding that there was a great deal to be done in the way of visiting the sick, and instructing the ignorant, I offered my services to him for such purposes, and here I have worked for five years, trying to forget my sorrow, amidst activities such as this parish affords. I have plenty of occupation, and time does not hang heavily on my hands. My wound is healed, so far as the world can heal it. The first anguish of the laceration is deadened, and the bleeding is stanchèd : the dull unceasing aching I can bear, for I know I shall soon hear my Master's call.

‘What do you mean?’ asked Mercy, awe-struck by the speaker's manner.

Seven months ago (continued Mrs. Daintree) I began to feel certain pains in my side, as if a lance were darting into me.

I had my own apprehensions, and went secretly to London and consulted an eminent doctor, who confirmed my darkest fear. He told me that the pains were the early symptoms of a cancer, and already I feel by the increase of my sufferings that his prognostications will shortly be verified. I asked, was it likely I should suffer. He made no reply in words, but the look of compassion he cast on me was enough. 'I dread—dread,' cried Mrs. Daintree, rising from her seat, and clasping her hands, 'I dread the fearful impending bodily pain. Anything else; anything else. If it be possible, let this cup pass from me. I can say no more. The rest I cannot say.'

She spoke not to Mercy, but with eyes steadfastly set on the crucifix, and then she walked back to her seat. A silence followed which Mercy at last timidly broke :

‘Do you ever hear of your husband now?’ she inquired.

‘My story is nearly finished,’ replied the other. By accident I heard from time to time of him and his paramour. They lived luxuriously in Brussels, and found, I was told, an easy entrance into the society of the place. I dare say that a section of English residents on the Continent have the best reason for not being over nice in their choice of companions. My husband and Mrs. Arundel entertained splendidly, and from what I have heard they gathered around their table more than once persons who in their native land would scarcely venture to associate with men and women of openly immoral life. That, however, does not concern me. About two years after my husband deserted me, I was told by a friend who had relatives residing in Brussels, that he and Mrs. Arundel were

living on very bad terms. The fact was, she had conceived a new attachment. A certain major—though to what regiment he belonged no one ever heard—came to Brussels, and began to make a figure in the city, and, to my husband's great mortification, Mrs. Arundel commenced a most unreserved flirtation with the stranger, behaving with such audacity that even the scandalous people whom she knew were scandalised. Here I may tell you a few particulars, which I learned afterwards. The major perceived that Mrs. Arundel was fond of wine, and for his own ends encouraged her in this propensity. On a particular evening the pair went to the theatre together, without as much as telling my husband—so I must call him, I suppose—of their intention. Mrs. Arundel came home very late at night, excited with wine. The major was prudent enough not

to appear. No sooner had she entered the house than my husband broke out in a violent rage, and declared that her conduct was insufferable, and that she must learn to submit to his will, or she would suffer for it. She laughed in his face, and went to the sideboard to help herself to a glass of wine. Before she had put it to her lips, my husband darted to her side, and declared she should drink no more, and at the same time he ordered her maid, who at that moment walked into the room, to see her mistress safely in bed. The mistress, however, burst into a loud laugh, and said that if she did not take the wine he should, upon which she threw glass and liquor together into his face. Then she took her maid's arm in her own, and marched out of the room and upstairs, singing at the top of her voice. Wild with rage he hurried after them, but only to have

the door slammed in his face, while peals of laughter from both mistress and maid signified their contempt of himself and his anger. The next morning Mrs. Arundel took her leave of him, telling him with perfect coolness that her property was in her own right, and that she was tired of his temper, and indeed not disposed to trust herself in any man's hands at present. So she left him, and, perhaps by her instructions, the maid spread the story far and wide, to his unspeakable mortification. Mrs. Arundel shortly after left Brussels and went to Paris, and I have heard nothing more about her.

I have been told that my husband's vexation at this desertion was most profound. He could not endure the ridicule, of which he fancied himself the object, among his companions and friends, and hastily broke up his establishment, and wandered for several

months—so I ascertained afterwards—from place to place through the Continent. His life during this period was, no doubt, very irregular, but I know no particulars. One day, about a year and a half ago, I received a short letter from him. It was almost illegible, but there was just enough trace of his former handwriting to enable me to identify it. He had not added his signature. ‘I am dying,’ the words were, ‘come to 43——— Street, Regent’s Park.’ The news quite stunned me, for I had no reason to suppose he was ill; and though I had little cause for loving him, I burst into tears. Indeed, I think I cried all the way as I travelled to London.

It was a grey cold December afternoon when I reached the house he had mentioned. An elderly woman opened the door, and in answer to my hasty questions, told me that

he came there about three weeks before, in feeble health, and since that time had gradually grown worse. No one had seen him except the doctor and his nurse, and he was now rapidly sinking. Merciful heaven, with what a fainting heart I entered that gloomy chamber! With what an effort of will I turned my eyes to the bed where I was to see him lying!

His eyes were closed. A deathly paleness overspread his face, and his black hair was thrown back from his forehead so as to bring his magnificent profile into the most striking relief. I tell you, my child, woman never yet admired more passionately the face and form of a man than I did his. I had seen him in all the glory of youth and vigour, but never until that moment did I know what manly beauty might be. His hands and face were wasted, but his splendid limbs,

the shape of which were seen under the thin coverlet—for he was feverish, and would not endure a blanket—retained their former proportions. The finely moulded fingers, the mouth with the light moustache, which used to be my pride, the long eyelashes, the dark pencilled brows, all were untouched by the hand of disease. I gazed at him until his image began to tremble in my swimming eyes, and then, forgetting his desertion, and infidelity, and cruelty, and my own long-nursed indignation, forgetting it all like a dream, and realising only that my husband was lying before me at the point of death, I cast myself on my knees, and besought God to give him back once more to life and to me.

My sobbing awakened him, and as I raised my head he looked at me. He gave no sign of recognition, but feebly asked for wine.

The nurse, who was in the room, brought him a little champagne, and I eagerly took the glass from her hand, and tried to raise his head. But he frowned, and motioned me back, and signified that he wished the nurse to give it to him. She did so, and as he drank the wine he fixed his eyes upon me with a look of deep dislike and enmity, which fairly paralysed me. Distrusting my senses, I drew a little closer to him, and placed my hand (in which I happened to be holding my pocket-handkerchief) upon the bed beside him. I had been using eau-de-cologne to relieve my headache, and the perfume was still perceptible. I observed that my husband was making a great effort to speak, and bent to catch his words, when I saw the former look deepen into an expression of disgust and hatred which I cannot describe.

‘You—you are offensive to me,’ he gasped. ‘Keep away.’

There was a particular dexterity, which I could not but notice, in the way in which he made the scented pocket-handkerchief a pretext for letting me know that I, personally, was disagreeable to him. I walked from his side, and such is the pride of human nature that, dying as he was, I could not repress a feeling of resentment against him for this artful and studied insult. But in about half-an-hour I came to his side once more, and when I saw how much weaker he looked, how fast, in fact, he was sinking, all my anger vanished, and I knelt at his side.

‘Daniel,’ I whispered, ‘have you nothing to say to me?’

His power of speech seemed gone, but he was fully conscious, and he gave me another look—the last—which was not alone

malignant, but so full of pure dislike that in spite of the awful moment I could not overcome my mortification and anger. I spoke to him no more, and in a few minutes he fell asleep. All that night and all the following morning he lay sleeping his little remnant of life away. Every hour his breathing became fainter, and the deathly greyness of his face deepened, but he did not speak again, nor open his eyes. I sat near him, trying to commend him at intervals to the mercy of God, but for the most part, I am afraid, recalling the strange scenes of my life with this man. I well remembered his first look at me, a long, bold gaze of open admiration, which might, perhaps, have annoyed a more sensitive woman ; but me, I confess, it delighted ; for I was his slave from the moment I saw him. And now, by this last look he had effaced every sentiment

of affection from my heart, and had even planted resentment in its place. I had often imagined that we should spend eternity together ; and here I was sitting beside him as he was drawing his last breath, and I did not shed a tear. Rather, I believe, I wished for the end. I tried to forgive him, but I felt as if it would be a relief to know that we should never meet again anywhere. ‘Such,’ I said to myself, ‘is human life and human love.’ And as this thought was in my mind, I noticed the slightest possible drooping of his head on one side, and then I watched him attentively, and saw that he had ceased to breathe.

CHAPTER X.

MERCY'S SECRET.

THE next morning Mrs. Daintree came into Mercy's room a little earlier than usual, and was surprised to find her charge up and dressed, and busy writing letters.

‘How is this?’ she exclaimed. ‘What can have induced you to get up so soon?’

Mercy rose from her seat, but with a languid air, in spite of an obvious effort to seem active. She embraced her friend, giving her a kiss as fresh as the breath of a primrose, and then half blushing at her own temerity.

‘I have been so idle, so ungrateful, so

selfish,' she exclaimed, 'I wonder you have had patience with me so long. I am going back to school this afternoon. It is not very far, and I shall be able to come and see you soon, ma'am, and I shall never—never forget your kindness, and your goodness—and your sorrow,' Mercy added, her eyes filling with tears, as she remembered the past and present trouble of her benefactress.

Mrs. Daintree returned the generous girl's embrace, and then holding her at arm's length, just as she had done on the morning when they first met, looked into her face for a long time until Mercy began to feel frightened.

'You are not going back to school at all,' she said, withdrawing her gaze, when she saw how Mercy's colour came.

'Not going back to school!' exclaimed

Mercy. 'Oh, ma'am, I must. You don't know what a busy life I lead.'

'I know all about you, dear,' replied Mrs. Daintree. And at the sight of Mercy's amazed face she broke into a little laugh, which gave Mercy another fright, for except a particular sad smile, she had never seen anything like a sign of amusement on Mrs. Daintree's face.

'Child,' said Mrs. Daintree, stroking her cheek, 'I have been watching over you ever since you came to Riverhead.'

'Since I came to Riverhead!' exclaimed Mercy, lost in wonder. 'Surely that cannot be.'

'I know a great deal more about you than you know about yourself,' said her friend. 'I saw you long before you saw me. I know your whole history, your name, your father's life, all that concerns you.'

Mercy sank into a chair, quite overpowered by this astounding disclosure, and unable to say a word.

‘I have told you that I am living on the estate of a kind relative, who had compassion on me,’ continued Mrs. Daintree. ‘Now, you know you have a guardian.’

‘But his name I never knew,’ cried Mercy.

‘His name is Molton,’ continued Mrs. Daintree. ‘His mother and mine were dear sisters, and he and I saw a great deal of each other in childhood and youth. He was your father’s greatest friend. I saw both your father and mother before they were married, when she was a fresh, innocent, delightful girl like—you.’ She lighted on this similitude suddenly, and kissed Mercy as she spoke.

‘I must be dreaming, surely,’ murmured the girl. ‘This cannot be real.’

‘Beautiful she was indeed,’ continued Mrs. Daintree, who did not hear this exclamation. ‘Fairer than I can tell—such skin—such dazzling skin—and her hair was the richest auburn. I don’t wonder your father loved her ; and her character was as delightful as her person. Poor dear ! God called her early to her rest. She was not fit for this troublesome world.’

‘And my father—my father?’ asked Mercy, scarcely knowing what she said. ‘You said you knew him too.’

‘I saw very little of him,’ replied Mrs. Daintree. ‘But he was one of those high, clear, sunny natures which soon disclose themselves to anyone who has eyes to see and ears to hear. He had faults—failings let me call them—he was far too generous and clever to be perfect. But he had a lofty soul, and all his infirmities were those of a noble mind.’

Saying this, Mrs. Daintree put into Mercy's hand a little packet, carefully sealed.

'This contains,' she said, 'an account of your father's life, written by himself, and intended for your perusal. It has lain in my cousin's hands for twenty years, waiting for a reader, as your father did not wish you to see it until you were grown to womanhood.'

With these words Mrs. Daintree left the room, and Mercy, whose heart had almost stopped beating, found herself alone with the secret of her life.

The packet contained portraits of her father and mother, and with these the small manuscript volume of autobiography, which Diana had discovered at the time of her brother's last illness. A few pages were added, which carried the narrative up to the time of Diana's visit to Death, and recounted her offer of adopting his baby.

There was no malice in the recital, but the suppressed grief which coloured every sentence—the high-spirited but agonised endurance of bitter wrong—were not to be mistaken. Mercy sat like a statue while she read the manuscript through from the first page to the last; that is to say, she was statue-like, so far as motion went, but the paleness and redness which swept over her face in alternate waves, and the tears which chased each other faster and faster down her cheeks, were pretty plain signs of life and feeling. Poor Mercy could scarcely hear a sorrowful story about remote persons without weeping: now the hero and heroine of the tragedy were her own father and mother. She had loved them, unknown as they were, with a devotion which, as it was certainly more romantic, was perhaps even more intense than if they had been personally

known to her. Now the veil that had so long concealed them was drawn aside, and her fondest and proudest dreams were realised. Her mother was womanly and beautiful, and her father, by his own frank and modest portraiture of himself, must have been the most winning of men. In rank, too, her parents occupied a position which, in the lowly eyes of the village schoolmistress, was almost aristocratic. Nothing external was wanting to satisfy her, and, for this very reason, her grief and indignation at the wrongs her parents had endured were more unalloyed.

‘Is it right to hate one person in the world, if you forgive everyone beside?’ she asked herself, as she shut the book. ‘We are to forgive those who injure ourselves, but does God bid us forgive those who have injured others? Diana Bolton! There is

one in this world whom I shall hate until I die—accursed woman—Diana Bolton !’

As she uttered the name she gave a scream of surprise. Strange as it seems, in the hurry and excitement of her thoughts, the identity in the names had not struck her. She almost fainted as the fact opened upon her : Diana Bolton was Miss Crow’s friend, and, more piercing still, Penruddocke Bolton was her own cousin ! She felt as if all at once she had been transported into a new world, and was herself a new being. Such a confluence of different streams of interest and feeling had never occurred in her life before, and indeed, in the most eventful life, would have been remarkable. Mercy rested her head upon her hand, for her brain was beginning to swim, and she felt the old delirious sensation coming upon her, and the realities around her receding from view, and yet in a strange way present

at the same time. She saw the room and the table, on which her arm was placed, and yet she saw them not. A kind of faint consciousness of her actual surroundings remained, blended, without any sense of amazement, with a whole tissue of visions. People were hurrying to and fro in the room, going in and out at the door, noiseless and swift, coming sometimes close to her side, and thrusting their faces into hers and speaking to her without a sound, but she knew what they said. Then all would vanish. The paper on the wall, her little bed, the table before her, took their own form again, and the phantoms were gone. But just as she rose to the surface of consciousness again, and caught a glimpse of reality, she was plunged anew in visions. The same people were there, going to and fro as before, gliding out and gliding in, looking at her and at one another with faces full of

meaning, each intelligible, every look translated into speech, but no sound. At last, as if this had been but a prelude, the forms she had seen passed away imperceptibly from her view. She was in the house of old Robert Bolton, and there was her grandfather, and her aunt Diana, and her own father and mother, and Penruddocke, all together, and she with them, engaged in some violent dispute. Then she was with her father and mother in the early summer dawn, and they were making ready to fly away to be married ; and the next moment it was herself and Penruddocke that were flying away in a carriage together. But all these visions gave place to one which was more actual and far more terrible than those that went before.

She was now in her own room, and saw everything plainly and actually, but nothing she saw was more vivid or substantial in its semblance than the group which gathered

round her. Miss Crow, hooped and witch-like, was standing before her, and over the old woman's twisted shoulder there appeared a face, coming out like a kind of second head to the deformed figure : that face was Diana's—hateful—accursed—but she knew it at a glance, and screamed as she saw it glaring upon her with a hellish malignity. As she shrank from this apparition, another appeared. It was Penruddocke, himself and yet not himself, wonderfully like and unlike ; a countenance full of self-conceit, and moral weakness, and sensual passion ; and he was beckoning her to his side, with the leer of a satyr. She put her hands to her eyes, to shut out the horrid sight. A new face stole in between her fingers and her eyes, and struck its image on her inmost soul : the grandfather, whose blood was in Penruddocke's veins and in her own ! The old man's wicked face seemed sharp, and white, and hard, with

evil tempers and diabolical aversions, as if all his earthly animosities had been heated to a more fiendish fury since his death. She opened her eyes again, but the light brought no release, for the four—Diana, Miss Crow, and her father and Penruddocke—drew closer around her, each threatening to seize her, while she shrank equally from all. Her own mother and father were blotted out of view, and there was none to help her. And now Penruddocke was clasping her in his arms, although she struggled against his hated embrace, when suddenly a new figure burst into the scene, who threw Penruddocke aside, and caught her in his arms. Mercy felt a sense of indescribable relief, repose, and sweetness of soul ; and, just as she was gratefully sinking into her deliverer's arms, she saw his face, and it was that of her guardian's son—her own repulsed lover, Molton.

CHAPTER XI.

PENRUDDOCKE'S PENITENCE.

THE night which followed the terrible revelations which were made at the house of Miss Crow was a fearful one for Penruddocke. His feet had been taken in the snare that he had laid for Mercy. Had he but been true, manly, and faithful to the sweetest of women, what raptures he would have enjoyed, pressing her to his heart, the love of his life, his equal in rank, and secured without any sacrifice of money or comfort. Now she was doubly torn from him. He knew her noble nature, and felt sure that even poverty would not induce her to marry a man she despised ;

and besides, he surmised that the motive of poverty must have disappeared, for Mr. Molton had made it pretty evident that his intention was to adopt Mercy as his daughter immediately. In a frenzy of jealous rage, Penruddocke recalled young Molton's admiring looks at the schoolmistress. Yes, all was clear. Mercy would soon be the happy, honourable wife of the young clergyman, and from the security of wealth, and an assured position, would look back upon her connection with him with scorn and ridicule. Twice that night Penruddocke sprung out of his feverish bed, and caught up his razor, and once he almost wept, as the thought crossed his mind, that, if he slew himself in a fit of remorse, Mercy might then forgive him, and pardon an offence which had been washed out in his life's-blood. But Pen did not kill himself: he only thought how

pathetic his end would be if he were to do so. There was some goodness in his nature, and not a little histrionic emotion ; he thought better of himself for even contemplating such an expiation.

With the dawning morning a ray of comfort shone upon him. Perhaps Mercy had not really received the fatal letter ! She had certainly not read it when she wrote to him, and perhaps, in the hurry of her flight, had never got it, or had lost it. The hope was very faint, but it relieved the blackness of his thoughts, and he would not quench it.

Breakfast was a miserable affair. His father talked over the occurrences of the last night with exasperating, but not unreasonable, pertinacity. Indeed, the sluggish intellect of Hercules had never felt so quickening a series of shocks as in the disclosures of the night before. To learn that his sister

intended that her nephew should marry a schoolmistress was surprising, but this marvel quite subsided when the discovery was made that, unknown to everybody, this schoolmistress was his brother's child—Diana's niece—Penruddocke's cousin. And even this astounding disclosure was dwarfed by the assumed revelation of the mysterious Miss Crow's real personality. Hercules could scarcely credit that fact. Again and again he thrust it from him as impossible, and as often the mole under the chin and the note of her voice recurred to his mind, and gave re-entrance to Molton's assertion. But how could a comparatively young woman have grown aged in twenty years? More marvellous still, how could a straight figure have been changed into the crooked and dwarfish body of Miss Crow? Was it not easier to suppose that two friends should each have a

mole under the chin, than that Diana Bolton, in her fifty-fifth year, should be a crone of eighty in looks, and hooped like Sycorax? So Hercules beat the round of the argument over and over again, first this way, then the opposite, until, like a child running in a circle, he began to feel dizzy with the sameness of the movement.

He had been, however, sufficiently impressed with the possibility of the identity being real, to cause him to beseech Mr. Molton to preserve a rigid silence on the subject, especially to Miss Travis, his new-found niece. This promise was readily given, for Molton judged that, on every ground, it would be better that Mercy should not be put in possession of Miss Crow's secret. Hercules also warned his son against letting fall any hint of the matter, either in Miss Crow's presence or anywhere else;

and these latter warnings he couched in language of such vigour, as left no doubt of the sincerity of his fears of what might happen if in any way he or his son were discovered by Diana to have found what she, for her own reasons, had chosen to conceal so profoundly.

While the two were speaking on this subject, a note arrived from Miss Crow for Penruddocke. She desired him to come to her at once, as she and his aunt were about to start for London on important business. Penruddocke was not sorry to cut short the conversation with his father, so he rose from the table at once, and was out of the house in five minutes.

The change in Miss Crow was fearful to see. Her hair was disordered, and she still wore her rich velvet evening dress, but it was torn in several places, and covered with

dust, as if she might have been rolling on the floor. Her head-dress had fallen off, and her hair hung down in great ungainly locks. Her hands were soiled, and the left was stained with blood, while her yellow-white face looked like that of the corpse of one who has died in extreme agony. Her gait too had changed. Instead of her usual short swift steps, which gave her a gliding and not ungraceful movement, she walked in a slow, dragging way, like one half paralysed. But the young man forgot all these changes when she spoke, for her voice was so low, so ghost-like, so surcharged with suppressed emotion, that Pen shuddered when he heard it, and felt as if a being from the other world was at his side. Miss Crow bid him sit down, upon which she drew a chair to his side and seated herself, falling instantaneously into a reverie, and

apparently 'forgetting' his presence. After some minutes she looked up at him.

'I thought your aunt would have died last night,' she said.

'Did you?' was all Penruddocke had spirit to utter.

'The shock was terrible — piercing — enough to cleave her very soul asunder,' continued Miss Crow, rather speaking to herself than to him.

'What shock do you mean?' Penruddocke asked, in a voice quite awe-struck, and less audible than hers.

'The discovery about the girl—Mercy Travis,' Miss Crow replied.

'You mean that she is my cousin,' said Penruddocke. 'The daughter of my uncle Death.'

Miss Crow winced, and shook her head from side to side, grimacing with her lips in

alternating fury, determination, and enraged indecision.

‘Yes,’ she cried, ‘the daughter of Death Bolton, who was Diana’s bitter enemy all his life long, and whom she hates in his grave more than she hated him living. Diana loves you, Penruddocke, as she loves her own soul, and she discovered—no matter how—that you had fallen in love with this village schoolmistress. Indeed, she has watched your steps when you little suspected it. She made inquiries about this girl, and was pleased with her—more than pleased, I may say—for the child is winning and beautiful. Diana resolved by one stratagem to test your obedience, and reward you if it was found sufficient. So she desired you to marry a wife of her choice, but all the time the choice was to be really that of your own manly heart.’

The old woman was now standing beside Penruddocke, clutching at his shoulder in the excitement of her feeling. He was quite unable to hide the anguish of his soul. He put her hand aside and rose from his chair, and began pacing the room like a madman, pressing his hands against his forehead, as if he would crush his temples in.

‘Blindness ! infatuation !’ he groaned aloud. ‘Oh, miserable, most miserable wretch that I am !’

The violence of his passion had a quieting effect upon Miss Crow, and hobbling in his wild footsteps, she spoke in a softer tone, and even tried to console him, as she imagined. ‘Do not despair,’ she said. ‘Diana has not yet finally decided to forbid the marriage ; and she will remember your obedience, and may even allow the girl to become your wife—if she can—if she can ;’

and Miss Crow clenched her lips in a way that signified how bitter the concession must be.

Penruddocke made no answer, but only shook his head and walked to and fro impetuously. Miss Crow could not but misunderstand his excitement.

‘It is spirited—noble of you, to identify yourself with your aunt,’ she said. ‘This girl inherits a legacy of hatred from her father. She is the daughter of Diana’s implacable foe, and this struggle between your love for her and your duty to your aunt is honourable to you—the more bitter the struggle, the more it becomes you. But take heart. The girl is not personally guilty, and Diana may, for your sake, and for Mercy’s unaccountable beauty of character, be induced to forget. She will consider the matter at least.’

Penruddocke recovered his spirits a little : it was a comfort that Miss Crow was in the dark as to the real cause of his perturbation. The old lady then proceeded to tell him, that only an hour ago she received a note from Mr. Molton, from which she learned that Mercy's whereabouts was no longer a secret. She was in good hands, but prostrated by a sudden return of illness. She was evidently suffering—the letter said—from some dreadful shock, which had almost upset her reason.

Penruddocke upon hearing this grew deadly pale. His last faint hope was extinguished. The unknown shock must be, he well knew, the disclosure of perfidy which his own fatal letter had made. Again he groaned aloud, and pressed his hands against his forehead, and in that short space of fiery pain and remorse he paid double for his sin. Miss Crow went on misreading his manner.

‘The girl will not die,’ she whispered. ‘Her constitution is of that healthy sort which contains within itself a fountain of healing. But her guardian says that she must be kept in perfect quiet for several weeks, and that in due time he will furnish me with her address. It is an insolent message,’ remarked Miss Crow, with her old domineering air. ‘It is excessively insolent, but I suppose we must bear it. And there are certain advantages gained by the girl being kept out of sight for a little while.’

Penruddocke thought so too, but did not mention his reasons. Only again, by a miracle of will, he managed to recover his composure.

‘And now I have a bit of news for you,’ continued Miss Crow, trying to assume an easy air. ‘Diana wishes to go to London, where she will be detained by important busi-

ness for three or four weeks. I shall accompany her, and remain with her, and when her engagements are fulfilled, I shall again welcome her under my roof. As soon as we return I shall let you know.'

As she spoke, she led the way through the little morning room, which opened on the entrance hall. She pushed the door open, and in so doing upset a chair which stood against it. Upon this chair was set the shrine, which has been already mentioned twice in this narrative. The shrine fell to the ground with a crash, and Penruddocke hastily lifted it, before the old woman's attempt to intercept him could succeed. He saw the portrait within the shrine, and instantly recognised it.

'This is my grandfather!' he exclaimed, before he recollected his father's words of warning.

The warning was forcibly recalled to his mind the next moment. Miss Crow gave him a look of displeasure, which frightened him by its intensity and suddenness. He was just stammering out an apology for an offence he could not comprehend, when he saw that the old woman's face smoothed down as quickly as it had roughened. She even forced a smile. 'It belongs to your aunt,' she said. 'Diana idolised her father, and his portrait is always near her. She and I met with one of the chief disciples of M. Comte some years ago, and he disclosed to us the doctrine of the worship of humanity. That doctrine appeared to both of us very imperfect, and yet we felt that it contained some truth. But, in our view of the matter, instead of worshipping humanity, personified by an abstract figure, each worshipper should have a representation of the

man or the woman—the human being, let me say—whom he most revered; and should make this his particular embodiment or symbol of humanity. Taking this view, Diana soberly and literally worships that picture, day by day, and night by night. For her it is a living thing. It is the picture,' cried the old woman, while her face lighted up with enthusiasm, and her voice rose and fell in tones of solemnity and pathos, which were in strange contrast with the croaking raven-like notes of her common speech—'it is the picture of a noble, yes, and a faultless man, so strong, so just, so loving, where love was merited. His memory is better than the living companionship of the best who treads the earth to-day; and—Diana thinks—in all the universe there is nothing so worthy of worship as this portrait. Great and good, good and great, and yet he is almost forgotten

now. She alone, of all the world, bears his memory in her breast, and when she dies he with her shall pass away, and be as though he had never been.'

Her voice passed into a kind of chant at the close, and there was an inexpressible depth and solemnity in the accents in which the final words were spoken. Penruddocke for an instant forgot himself and his misery, and gazed down at the weird, dwarf figure, and wondered what accidents of character and of circumstance had framed the living problem which stood before him. Was she his aunt? the inexplicable, inexorable Diana? —he answered his own question with a Yes and a No in the same breath.

Then he was summoned back to the facts of his own life :

'Call upon me this day four weeks, at this hour.'

There stood before him the ordinary Miss Crow—disordered in appearance, it is true, but in manner as composed and quaintly dogmatic as ever. And he passed under her spell once more, and said, ‘I shall be here,’ with the submission of a school-boy ; and so they parted.

CHAPTER XII.

HOW HE WAS COMFORTED.

AND there he was, in the very same drawing-room, that day four weeks, as the clock was striking twelve. And before the vibration of the last stroke had ceased the door opened, and Miss Crow walked into the room, and took his hand in a kind, caressing way, and told him he was punctual, an excellent thing in a young man.

Penruddocke was struck with the change in Miss Crow's appearance since he had last seen her. Her face was now serene, and even sweet in its expression, and her dress was gayer than he had ever seen it. She

could be both humorous and pathetic in her ways, goblin old creature as she was, and there was a touch of both moods about her now, as she greeted her young friend ; and Penruddocke felt that, in spite of all her unearthliness, she was flesh and blood like himself.

‘Diana,’ said the old woman, ‘maintains her resolution never to see you, or your father, or any English friend ; and I am her deputy, and shall be so until her business with you all is concluded.’

For something to say, Penruddocke remarked that he supposed it would be but little use to try to persuade his aunt to alter her stern resolution. The old woman laughed out at this suggestion, as if it were truly comical :

‘Diana change her mind ! She will—when frost burns and fire freezes.’

‘And now, Penruddocke,’ cried the old woman, ‘you don’t know what is in store for you. You are going to be a man of fortune, on the spot, at once, and for ever.’

She opened a large satchel, and drew from its depths three portentous-looking envelopes of extraordinary size. ‘There is your fortune,’ she said, holding the envelopes out, with an air of most unusual vivacity. ‘Suppose I were to run off with these! There is no need for any deed of conveyance or any document, or any name. No transfer has to be signed, and no broker employed. All is complete. Take your aunt’s gift, and you shall see that you are her dependent no longer, but a man of fortune in your own right. You reap now the fruits of obedience.’

Penruddocke opened the packets, and saw that they contained a quantity of securi-

ties in the shape of colonial and foreign bonds. A glance told him that the total sum represented must be extremely large, and so indeed it turned out to be: his aunt had given him fifty thousand pounds.

‘Diana wishes me to say,’ Miss Crow remarked, as he looked over his treasures, ‘that your father is provided for, by an annuity of one thousand a year. It expires at his death, and you have no farther expectations either from him or from your aunt.’

‘Further expectations from my aunt,’ murmured the amazed Penruddocke. ‘I should think not. But has she not impoverished herself?’

‘Her wants are few,’ replied the old woman, ‘and her time is short. The remainder of her fortune she will apply to public uses, but how or for what end you shall never know.’

Penruddocke stammered out a few words of thanks, and they were sincere enough, for the mysterious bond of dependence which had hitherto connected him with his aunt was broken asunder, and he was not only rich, but free as well. The elation of wealth ran through his veins, and he remembered Detmar's words about venison and champagne with a woman for whom you did not care being better than bread and cheese with the woman you loved. Penruddocke felt that there was something in the statement; and now, let students of the soul explain it if they can, the young man felt, for the first time, angry with Mercy, as if she had done him a wrong which he ought to resent. 'A cold prude!' he said to himself—and perhaps not so virtuous as she seemed. Why should such a thought have followed immediately upon this sudden accession of riches? Who can demon-

strate the chemistry of the feelings? Hitherto Penruddocke had thought of Mercy with a changing cheek, or a moistened eye, but now he began to regard himself as an important man, and a wealthy, and such as might sail near the wind in matters of virtue, especially where the virtue was the property of a poor young woman, who, after all, must be accustomed to very plain living. With fifty thousand pounds in his hand, he was not so fearful of an interview with Mercy as he had hitherto been. He almost felt that he could open a conversation with her, holding his head high in air. Because, plainly, it must be to her advantage to marry him—that is, if *he* did not change his mind. Now all this arose in Penruddocke's breast, because he found himself suddenly master of fifty thousand pounds. And this fact shows plainly how conducive riches are to moral courage, for

certainly he had before trembled at the thought of Mercy and her rebukes.

His short and varied reverie was soon interrupted.

‘Diana has forgiven her niece,’ said Miss Crow, in a serious voice.

‘Forgiven her—forgiven Mercy Travis,’ cried Pen. ‘I did not know there had been any offence.’

‘You knew that she was the child of Death Bolton,’ replied the old woman. The struggle against her righteous indignation was to Diana a bitter one—a struggle in which she gnashed her teeth, and clenched her hands, and tore her hair. It was hateful to her, to see her enemy rising from the grave to thwart her, and the more hateful because the daughter was noble and lovely. If she had been vicious—if she had been repulsive to the eye—if she had been an out-

cast from society, trampled in the mire of life, Diana would have rejoiced to know it, for shall not the sins of the fathers be visited upon the children? But the girl was winning, and delicate, and sweet, and high-minded, and all that Death Bolton's daughter should not have been. Well, let that pass : she is going to marry you.'

'What !' cried Penruddocke, greatly excited. 'You have seen her?'

'I am going to see her,' Miss Crow replied, 'and I shall tell her that she is to be your wife.'

She spoke like one who had but to speak to be obeyed.

'Let me see her first before you see her,' said Penruddocke eagerly. 'You must let me have the first interview.'

He spoke vehemently, and Miss Crow looked at him, for she was not used to the

word must. She evidently thought that his manner meant something unusual.

‘Have you any particular reason for seeing Mercy before I see her?’ she inquired. ‘Have you anything secret to say to her, anything that your aunt is ignorant of?’

‘No, there is no secret,’ Penruddocke replied, but with an uneasiness which did not escape Miss Crow’s observation. But if you do not object to gratify me——’

‘As you please,’ she said, nodding her head. ‘If you have any private words to exchange——’

‘Oh, not exactly private words,’ said Penruddocke, trying to laugh.

‘Whatever the communication may be,’ continued Miss Crow, ‘you shall make it before I speak to Mercy. We shall travel together and visit her in her seaside home.’

‘You are most considerate,’ replied Pen-

ruddocke humbly, and there the matter ended.

Miss Crow went on to tell him that she had heard from Mr. Molton, who had given Mercy leave to return to Uphill, only however that she might make arrangements for retiring from her school duties, and breaking up her little home. He had assented with readiness to Miss Crow's offer that Mercy should stay at the house of her patroness, and his kind letter had even softened the old woman, who was disposed to treat him as a usurper so far as Mercy was concerned. Miss Crow replied to him with very unusual civility, though perhaps she had a design in this, for she appeared to have made up her mind that she would do all in her power to secure the marriage of Penruddocke to Mercy.

‘Diana is satisfied,’ she said to Penrud-

docke; 'and as to Mercy's guardian, as he calls himself—why I am sure I don't know—he cannot object to such a match. Even if he had any objection it would avail nothing. She shall be your wife; of that I am determined.'

'Will my aunt see her new niece?' inquired Penruddocke, who judged that he might safely ask this question.

'Your aunt has gone,' said Miss Crow in a solemn voice. 'Her work in England is done, and she has returned to a seclusion from which she will never emerge. She came to England to hand over to you the fortune which she has apportioned to you, and to make arrangements for your marriage, and to see you——'

'To see me!' exclaimed Penruddocke, inclined to believe that Molton's notion of the identity of Miss Crow with his aunt must be

a delusion after all. 'Why, then, has she left without seeing me?'

'She saw you, watched you, heard you talking, on several occasions when you thought we were alone,' replied Miss Crow with a smile of triumph. 'She admires you, Penruddocke, for, as you know, you are her child mentally. She has watched over the growth of your morals and your opinions, and has designed you to exhibit to the world the power of a true education to form a noble character. She has shut off every ray of superstition from your mind. She has made you of the earth, earthy; and it is her pride to feel that you are true, manly, honourable, and one that would die before he would deceive.'

Penruddocke turned crimson at these words.

'Your modesty is not your least charm,'

continued the old woman, who saw the blush. ' It is the praise of true virtue to be unconscious of its own worth. The most conspicuous sign of intrinsic weakness in what are called the Christian virtues is their perpetual introspectiveness. Your goodness is like the beating of your heart ; it goes on without an effort of will ; and such shall all goodness be, when the falsehood of faith in anything supernatural is abolished and obliterated from life. Live with the dawning of that day ever in view, Penruddocke. Think about it, work for it, and, now that your aunt has made you a rich man, do not forget that your duty is to serve the age, and not subside into sluggish and ignoble living. Slay the lies that surround you on every side. At home, abroad, in private and in public, never lose an opportunity of denouncing the congeries or absurd untruths by which people hope to save what they call

their souls. Never pretend to listen when a grace is being said. Never by any, even the most superficial assent, tolerate the mockery of prayer. You know there is no supernatural world, or being, and do not be entrapped by any false courtesy into the most tacit recognition of the lie. Be as your grandfather was, a reformer, and a brave one. Let your soul be without fear, and your life without reproach, and in this way you will repay your aunt, who so long as she lives will, by ways you know not, learn all about you.'

It was wonderful to hear this incomprehensible creature glowing with fervour of the most unfeigned kind, while she uttered words which most persons would regard with horror. Miss Crow's eyes lighted up, and a flush broke out on her withered cheek as she spoke; and she waved her long arm in the air, and her voice rang with a prophetic

solemnity. She paused a moment, and closed her eyes reverently, as if to dwell for an instant in secret on what she had said.

Penruddocke did not venture to speak, and she, after shaking her head for a while in deep thought, said :

‘ Come to lunch to-morrow, and tell me what you think about your work in life. Are my thoughts your thoughts ? ’

CHAPTER XIII.

SORROW THAT TURNS INTO JOY.

MERCY was fast regaining her health and strength. As old Miss Crow said, hers was a sound constitution, and although she had lain quite prostrated by the fearful shock of discovering how base her lover had been, yet she recovered, more rapidly than could have been expected, not only her health, but her spirits too. And just now, when spring was painting the skies with genial tints, the bloom was reappearing on Mercy's cheeks ; and she was finding out that for her affections there might be a second spring-time too, after this bleak winter of disappointment.

Every idea of dying in a mood of wounded love was gone. Mercy meant to live, and to enjoy life ; and she confessed this revolution in her feelings with the innocent frankness which was one of her most charming qualities. No doubt, her friendship with Mrs. Daintree had exerted a powerful influence over her feelings. The story of that injured woman profoundly impressed her, and day by day her heroic character, and her lofty endurance of sorrow, taught Mercy new lessons in noble living. Mrs. Daintree was a person of much devotion, and spent a considerable part of each day in retirement, but she was none the less an engaging, and even a lively companion. She gave Mercy regular instruction in the habits of good society, and supplied in this way a marked want in the girl's education ; for, with the utmost refinement of feeling, Mercy had of necessity

but little knowledge of the manners of the men and women among whom she would soon be received as an equal. Innumerable were the lessons: the teacher was competent and the pupil receptive; and at last, even sad Mrs. Daintree would break into a little laugh over Mercy's ingenuous simplicity, and would kiss her, and tell her that a thousand Courts could never have given her that endearing nature. Mercy was always making her own sex fall in love with her.

The village lay between two green hills, and on both sides of a road, which ran down to the edge of a little harbour, where a few fishing boats found anchorage. Here, in winter time, the seas would rage against the rocky headland, shooting higher than the cliffs in rebounding spray, and now, beneath more pacific skies, the water rolled gently in regular waves of white and blue. The breezes were

just what Mercy wanted, and as she drew in each breath of the strong pure air, she felt her life more and more renewed. The weather was too treacherous to permit of sitting on the shore, for, amid the tempting sunshine, a keen wind blew. But Mercy and her companion would saunter up and down the water's edge for an hour or two together, turning into a cottage now and then for rest. Mrs. Daintree was known, and a welcome guest, in every cottage in Riverhead.

During Mercy's convalescence, her guardian, Mr. Molton, paid her several visits, and she soon knew him, and loved him. He told her everything about her parents' history, and brought over the portraits of her father and mother, and showed all the time such an affectionate interest in the subject that Mercy's heart was soon and completely won. Indeed, Mr. Molton treated her as a daughter,

and she grew intimate with him very soon, and almost unconsciously accepted the relationship, receiving his never-failing kiss with the most unaffected ease. At last, one morning, Mercy, who in little sallies of tenderness was apt to be impulsive, ran forward to meet him as he entered the room, and threw her arms round his neck, and kissed him twice. Then, awakening to a sense of possible impropriety, she blushed and drew back. Mr. Molton, whose perception was as fine as ever, quite understood her mingled boldness and bashfulness, and was delighted with both.

‘Quite right, dear,’ he said, and though he smiled, tears came into his eyes. ‘I never had a daughter until now—only a son.’

It was the first time he had mentioned his son to her. Mercy blushed more deeply than before. But that afternoon, as she and

Mrs. Daintree were taking their walk, Mercy, with some symptoms of diffidence, asked whether her guardian's son was at home or in Uphill.

‘He is here,’ replied Mrs. Daintree, ‘and has been for the past month.’

‘For the past month!’ exclaimed Mercy. ‘What a long time! I wonder he has never—’

She stopped, at a loss to finish a sentence rashly begun.

‘What do you wonder at?’ asked Mrs. Daintree, biting her lips to hide a smile.

‘Oh, nothing!’ answered Mercy. ‘I thought perhaps he might have called to see me. I knew him at Uphill. Perhaps he is not like his father, and does not relish my transformation.’

This was said with a little toss of the head, and a pouting of the lips, which were very unusual with Mercy.

Mrs. Daintree, still biting her lip, glanced down at the girl's face.

‘The father has a particular reason for being interested in you,’ she remarked, ‘but not the son—not the son, surely?’

Now it was Mercy's turn to study her friend's face, and she saw at a glance that her secret was no secret to Mrs. Daintree.

‘Ah, then,’ said she softly, ‘you know all about it.’

‘I know,’ said Mrs. Daintree seriously, ‘that when you were only a village school-mistress you won the heart of the truest gentleman, for his years, that I have ever seen.’

‘You know I always liked him,’ said Mercy, in a tone of charming apology.

‘That,’ replied her companion, ‘you could not help. But liking is not loving. He loved you, Mercy.’

‘ I know it,’ said Mercy in a whisper.

‘ And having found out that you loved another, and that there was a difficulty in the way of your getting married, and guessing that the difficulty must be poverty—what do you think he has done ? ’ asked Mrs. Daintree.

‘ I cannot think,’ answered Mercy. But her feelings gave her an inkling of the coming disclosure.

‘ He has persuaded his father to assign to you one-third of the fortune which is to be his,’ continued Mrs. Daintree. ‘ And all he asks is, that he may see your face no more—for the present at least.’

Mercy said nothing, but her cheeks grew red, and her lips trembled with a feeling too deep for speech. What does any man know of the emotion of a good and warm-hearted woman when an offering of pure self-forgetting love is laid before her ? These gentle

beings will hardly condemn a sin when it is a sin of true and constant love, and who but themselves know their pleasure upon finding themselves the objects of a spotless and disinterested passion? Mrs. Daintree understood enough of the unspoken language of love to interpret Mercy's face. 'And do not think, because he did this,' she said, 'that he is a man of merely feeble benevolence, or turned into an ascetic by your refusal. He is full of life and energy, and has his own plans for the future.'

'What are they?' asked Mercy quickly.

'He has some scheme, the particulars of which he has not told us, about travelling for some years, with the idea of collecting personally information about the Christians of the East. I believe,' continued Mrs. Daintree, 'that he has an intention of writing a book. He has all his preparations made, and

will start in a fortnight. He is not gone yet, however,' she added significantly.

After this came a silence, which Mercy broke.

'You will give him a message from me, will you not?' she asked.

'Oh, certainly, a dozen messages,' cried her companion, in a very lively tone. 'Two dozen messages, if necessary.'

'Tell him,' said Mercy, without any echo of her friend's sportiveness, 'that I accept the noble feeling that bids him do so much for me, and accept it as the most precious offering I ever had. And tell him that I too know what disappointment means, and that I shall never marry now?'

'What was your disappointment, dear?' asked Mrs. Daintree, though she did not appear particularly curious about the reply.

'I loved a man who never existed,'

Mercy broke out, letting her long pent up secret rush forth. 'I loved manliness, and goodness, and truth, and kindliness, as my silly, silly eyes saw them embodied in a man. He had none of these things. He would have deceived me, and ruined me. He made my very simplicity, and my trust in himself, the traps by which to ensnare me. Oh, you have known what it is to love and despise the same man—but did you pass from love to scorn in an instant? While you were in the act of clasping him to your heart of hearts, did his disguise drop off, and show the villain and the liar? Your husband injured you, but beside my deceiver he might stand as an angel of light. Your husband never plotted to take your innocence away. He deserted you, but he left you a woman of honour, and able to face the eyes of all the world. My lover would have stripped me of

all these. He wanted to entrap me into a mock marriage, and he knew that, if he had succeeded, in the very hour when he would have been caressing me by the name of wife, I should have been only a ruined girl, with no helper but Heaven, and no hiding place but the grave. He knew all that, and he led me to the mouth of the pit, whispering love at every step we took, and it was my care for him that saved me in my simpleness from a doom which is inconceivable. I loved him—but I have torn him from my heart with a loathing such as a woman has never before felt for a man. And if he ever crosses my path again, wherever it may be, even if it was in the Queen's palace, I shall tell him he is a liar, and a thief of honour, and a disgrace to his nature, and that the whip and the hot iron are too good for such a pitiful impostor as he !'

Mrs. Daintree made no reply, but there was a singular and strong light in her eyes as she took Mercy's hand and pressed it between her own.

'I am excited,' said Mercy after a pause. 'I must have been saying something wicked.'

'Never mind, dear,' replied Mrs. Daintree. 'You told me most of this story in your wanderings on your sick bed. Let us talk of something else ;' and she gradually led the conversation back to young Molton, and Mercy's composure returned.

'Am I to tell him you cannot take his gift?' asked Mrs. Daintree, when an opportunity for the question occurred.

'Yes,' said Mercy. 'I mean to work for my living.'

'Tell me now, Mercy,' said Mrs. Daintree, 'could you not love Harry? Answer me frankly as a friend.'

Mercy's colour came in a very tell-tale way.

'Did you say,' she asked, 'that I told you all the story of Penruddocke in my delirium?'

'Most of it, dear.'

'Did I mention anybody else?'

'Why do you ask?'

'Because all my life,' replied Mercy, 'I have been subject to dreams—visions I may say, they are so intense and life-like. I was surprised to find, from my father's autobiography, that he was subject to the same sort of affection. These visions are so bright, and so constant sometimes, when I am only half asleep, that I scarcely know dreaming from waking. I see people, and talk to them, and make them quite companions for the time.'

'How singular!' remarked Mrs. Daintree.

‘But what has this to do with my cousin Harry?’

‘I was only going to say,’ replied Mercy, ‘that for some time past young Mr. Molton has been in almost every dream I have dreamed—so real, so handsome, so like himself. And I have been talking to him—perhaps talked out loud!’

For the second time that morning Mrs. Daintree gave a genuine merry laugh.

‘Mercy, dear,’ said she, stroking the girl’s cheek, ‘it is no great matter whether I overheard you or not. I see how your heart is beating, and I believe the Eastern Christians will have to find another friend.’

CHAPTER XIV.

AN APOLOGY.

THE next morning was warm and bright, and as the two friends sat at the window they were surprised to see a large carriage, the blinds of which were drawn down, turn in at the little gate, and sweep round the tiny drive to the front door. Immediately after the house rang with the echoes of the most prodigious knock that ever was knocked in the village of Riverhead. Mrs. Daintree and Mercy gathered up their work and retreated to a back room, and in the meantime the door was opened by the awe-struck little

housemaid, who being fourteen years of age and confined in her experience of life, came to the conclusion, as she hurried along the passage, that the Queen had come to make an early visit.

It was not the Queen, but in her absence a manservant, not dressed in livery, but of majestic manners in spite of his sober attire, who asked in a voice that was to the little maid terrible if Miss Travis was at home. In that awful presence, had it been midnight instead of early forenoon, the little maid would have said, 'Yes'; and scarcely had she spoken, when the great servant strode back to the carriage, and let down the steps with the noise of a falling house. Whereupon there stepped from the carriage a figure, which though it could not to the most disturbed vision have appeared like the sovereign of these realms, might have been readily

passed off upon the wondering girl as the Prince of Wales.

The figure was tall, well-proportioned, and undoubtedly handsome, both as to form and face, and the dress of the young gentleman was faultless, if somewhat showy in colour. But even the little maid remarked that the gentleman looked paler than death, and that his voice trembled so much that his speech was scarcely articulate. He asked to see Miss Travis—alone; and then followed her into the little drawing-room, and was shut in by himself. But before the little maid closed the door, she noticed that the stranger began to walk up and down the small room, as she had seen tigers do in the cage of a travelling menagerie.

Now it had so happened that, after their conversation yesterday, Mrs. Daintree had written a little private note, on a little private

subject, to her young cousin Harry Molton, and she at once concluded that it was he who had flown to his sweetheart's presence, for indeed he was madly in love, in spite of his outward self-restraint. The awful apparition of the carriage Mrs. Daintree easily explained by saying to herself that some neighbour had given Harry a lift, although the carriage was certainly strange to her. So she laughed, and told Mercy who she guessed the visitor to be, and added that Mercy had better see him at first alone; and told her, with a motherly caress, to run up to her glass and see if she could by any means make herself prettier—a feat which the speaker's admiring eyes, as they followed the agitated girl out of the room, seemed to intimate was difficult, if not altogether impossible.

A brush passed lightly through her shining hair, which even as she stood before her little

mirror was found out by a sunbeam, and shone upon, until every tress seemed burnished gold; a ribbon changed, and judged with head sideways, to see if it was in the best taste; a hasty shifting of boots, muddy with a morning walk in the garden, for a coquetish pair of little shoes; and all was done. Mercy, looking the very flower and bloom of her sex, and with a distracting perfection of colour in her cheeks, went down stairs trying to order the beating of her heart. However, she was not going to let herself be surprised into a surrender all at once, for many reasons.

Determined not to give her nervousness time to get the better of her, she opened the door instantly, and entered the room. Her hand fell from the handle; she stood fixed like a statue, no more daring to go a step farther than if a tiger had been there indeed, with yawning jaws, and body couch-

ing for a spring. Penruddocke was waiting for her!

Flutter, blushes, alternate fear and hope, playing over her beauty like varying lights—all vanished in the twinkling of an eye. Mercy turned as pale as the cowering man who stood before her, but her delicate frame was knitted all at once into erectness, and her face slowly fixed itself into a look of scorn that seemed nothing less than indelible, as if her features could never recover the soft look they wore just an instant before. Penruddocke was a young man, and a strong man, and he had all the conscious security of wealth to sustain him, but his heart fairly died in his breast as he saw with what a firm, unquailing look of extreme scorn Mercy met him. Could a being so affectionate, so gentle, ever look like this? Was this the face he had so often kissed, and whose sweet maidenly blushes he

had seen so often tenderly stealing out, as he gazed down upon it, leaning for a shelter against his breast ?

‘ Mercy,’ he began, in a voice that told his misery and shame, for his momentary indifference had gone, and he was more in love with her than ever, such as his love was. ‘ Mercy, I have come to see you.’

‘ I don’t know you,’ was all that came from her white lips. But she was in no way afraid of him : that was plain.

‘ You know Penruddocke Bolton,’ he said, in a supplicating voice.

‘ I know the name,’ she answered. ‘ He who bears it I never knew.’

She stood now, and through the rest of the conversation, just where she had stopped at the first sight of Penruddocke, and the door lay open behind her, for she meant each moment to retire, and let him make his way

out as best he could. The two were greatly excited, and their attention was absorbed with each other, or they must have heard a footstep slowly advancing through the hall and arrested close behind the spot where Mercy was standing. Miss Crow had softly followed her young friend, and now stood behind Mercy, resting on her gold-headed stick, and screened from view by the open door, but hearing every word that was spoken.

‘Mercy,’ said Penruddocke, ‘will you at least let me speak a few words.’

‘I will hear you,’ she replied.

This was what Penruddocke wanted. He had already framed an apology for his conduct, which he flattered himself would secure Mercy’s forgiveness, if she could but be persuaded to hear it patiently. He had indeed made ready for her ears the very same set of pleas by which he had inveigled

his better self until the abominable deceit he had attempted seemed right in his own eyes. Penruddocke was no mean rhetorician, and all things considered his defence was a clever one. He frankly admitted his guilt; and then proceeded to show by what pressure of circumstances he had been impelled to a course of conduct which he now saw in its true light, and abhorred. Penruddocke dwelt at great length upon the unamiable and despotic temper of his aunt, and even went so far as to say that, by training him up without any religious faith, she had left him unfortified against such a temptation as that to which he had been exposed.

The old woman gave a start and a snarl as he said this, but they did not hear, and she bent her head forward to catch every word, like a beast of prey ready to spring.

‘For after all,’ said Penruddocke, and

perhaps he spoke sincerely, 'religion may or may not be true, but if it is not true, there can be no reason why we should do right when it seems more pleasant and especially more prudent to do wrong. Had I been as good a Christian as you, Mercy, I should never have tried to deceive you in that way. But I am not a Christian—at least, I have not been one hitherto, thanks to my aunt.'

Miss Crow gave a long expired sigh of profound amazement, as if new worlds were opening upon her; and she drew up her upper lip, and protruded her great teeth, and waited for more.

Penruddocke pursued this line of defence for a long time, until at last Mercy interrupted him.

'You are to be pitied,' she said. 'Your education has been a bad one, and no doubt your aunt is in reality your enemy. I admit

all that. But common humanity, manliness—of love I don't speak—without any religion, would have restrained you from trying to ruin me by a mock marriage. I forgive you—but, after this day, I shall never speak to you again.'

He might have seen that she was inexorable, but her truth and her beauty had so intoxicated him that he could not believe his fate. He had noticed that the only time she discovered any symptoms of compassion for him was when he described the mischief which his aunt's training had wrought upon his character; and once again, when he ventured to declare that Diana's nature was, and always had been, tyrannical and furiously selfish. Mercy had good reason for disliking her aunt, and when Penruddocke said this, she broke silence, and remarked that he spoke the truth. So Penruddocke, in

his last desperation, willing by any device to move her, repeated afresh his complaints against his aunt's false ideas of education, and finished by saying that his father had always called Diana a tigress, 'and a tigress,' cried Penruddocke, 'she has been to me.'

At this instant Miss Crow walked into the room—or rather she sprang—and, standing between the two, glared from one to the other in a paroxysm of speechless fury. Mercy was frightened for a moment, but regained her composure; Penruddocke stood petrified, his mouth open, but not a word on his tongue. Miss Crow did not speak, but beating the air with her two clenched hands, and stamping with her feet on the ground, and turning from one to the other, she vented a long, inarticulate cry of fury, such as the dumb make when greatly enraged.

'You promised not to interrupt me,' said

Penruddocke at last, looking down upon the old woman with an expression of abject fear.

‘I have heard all you said,’ retorted Miss Crow, not stopping to justify herself for listening. ‘I have heard with my own ears what I would not have believed on the testimony of a hundred witnesses. I have had my last lesson in human nature. A beggar, and a beggar’s son, is this your gratitude to the aunt who has made you and your father what you are?’

Penruddocke was quite silenced by the force of this question. The disgrace of his situation was now breaking upon him—the perfidy of which by deed and word he had been guilty on every side—and he was overwhelmed with confusion and shame.

‘Your education has been a snare, has it?’ shrieked the old woman, going to him, and twisting her face upward, and gazing into his

with her awful expression of rage. 'You are spoilt for want of religion, are you? Don't deceive yourself. Liars are made of one stuff everywhere.'

'What do you say?' cried Penruddocke, awakening at the word.

'I said liars!' Miss Crow cried in reply. 'Liars—liars—liars—do you hear now? You are a liar! A liar to your aunt—a liar to me—a liar to this girl—a liar to your own soul—for you will not call yourself so, but frame fine excuses for your vile falsehood, in the hope that one day you may believe them yourself. Go from my presence! Take your aunt's wealth with you; live and rot, but remember for the rest of your life, remember—that you are a sham, a selfish, hollow, found-out sham, and if you had any manhood left you would kill yourself by your own hand rather than live on with such a past and with

such a nature. Go!—never let me see you again!’

‘This house is not yours,’ retorted Penruddocke. ‘You have no right to drive me from it.’

He looked at Mercy.

‘It is not my house either,’ she said, replying to his glance. ‘I have told you : from this day I shall never speak to you again.’

‘Brave girl!’ cried Miss Crow, catching her hand. ‘Despise the liar, now and for evermore!’

Maddened as he was with his situation, Penruddocke still hoped Mercy might relent, and tried to meet her eyes. He stood between the two, the old woman muttering and quivering, and in her excitement looking diabolical ; and the girl averting her head, like a good angel turning from a sinner in despair.

‘Mercy,’ he said beseechingly. ‘One word—one look.’

She did not move nor turn her head ; and while he stood gazing on her, in vain hope, Miss Crow, making as if she would tear him if he disobeyed her, cried in a voice that was scarcely human—

‘Begone—begone !’

Penruddocke looked at her. By some terrible effort she had turned her face upward, and her lips edged with white foam, and her distorted features, and her eyes from which rage seemed to stream in rays that might have power to blast those whom they struck, were all in view. For one moment the young man gave her look for look, computing his own strength to cope with her, but while he thus gazed her fury grew so intense, and her visage so unbearable, that he turned from the room, and silently left the house.

CHAPTER XV.

RETRIBUTION.

AFTER Penruddocke's departure, Miss Crow did not speak, nor even move, for several minutes, but stood, lost in thought, like one in a trance, with the traces of her passion fixed on her features, but without any sign of new emotion.

‘Something has been whispering to me for days past,’ she said, at last, not addressing Mercy, however, nor seeming to know that she was present. ‘Whispering—whispering—that he was deceiving me. Why should I have suspected him?—and yet I did suspect. Instinct must have told me—instinct, I sup-

pose. But the nature of the deception I did not guess, nor its depth—nor its depth.'

She relapsed into silence, and Mercy did not venture to speak or move. Since the young girl had read her father's autobiography, her love for Miss Crow had somewhat cooled, for Miss Crow declared herself to be the bosom friend, the admirer, and the imitator of Diana; and Mercy could not quite reconcile herself to the fact that the best beloved of her father's inveterate and cruel enemy should be her benefactress.

'So,' the old woman went on after a pause, 'that is the end of the model education—perfidy to this child, whom he pretended to love, and perfidy to me—to me. I cannot understand it: the world must be turning upside down.'

Down went her head again, and she snapped her lips together and became silent

for a time, but soon began afresh, in the same soliloquizing voice :

‘ His mother was conceited, ignorant, purse-proud ; and his father—well, his father’s character required no great study. But I thought that the hereditary faults had been rooted out, and that a new nature had been planted in him. And I was wrong ; and a fortune, and a lifetime of thought, have been thrown away !’

Then with her eyes on the floor she pondered her thoughts again, abstracted, remote from things around, and so much absorbed with the weight and novelty of the disclosures just made to her that her passion died away for awhile, and she spoke in a grave voice, full of awe, like one who in his reasonings is exploring the recesses of life and philosophy, and feels himself on the threshold of some mystery of mysteries.

‘A mad world,’ she said several times over. ‘A mad, mad world. That is the explanation. There is no meaning anywhere. I am left at last, and the only being I can say I really love is his daughter—Death’s daughter. Her nature is the corrupt tree, and it has brought forth the good fruit ; and Penruddocke—my own planting, my own watering—oh, but it is a mad world, without reason and without end.’ These fragments of speech dropped from her at intervals, slowly and weightily.

She had lost recollection, even of herself, in the problem over which she brooded.

Mercy began to feel alarmed, and was on the point of trying to reach the door ; but before she moved the oldwoman looked up, and spoke to her in a collected and sensible voice :

‘Has it not been a shock to you ?’

‘It was a terrible shock,’ said Mercy. ‘It nearly killed me, but I have got over it now.’

‘You are a dear girl,’ said Miss Crow, suddenly changing into the old fondling way, but speaking most mournfully. ‘You are the dearest girl I ever knew—the dearest girl. Kiss me, Mercy.’

And she turned her white and shrivelled face upward, and received Mercy’s kiss almost with meekness. Then another tide of feeling swept down upon her, only this time of quite a different sort. She sank into a chair, and burst into a passion of sobs, and her grief was nearly as dreadful to behold as her rage had been before. Her body was convulsed with emotion, and she hid her face in her long bony fingers, and rocked herself from side to side, and every sob that broke from her was as full of agony as if just then her heart had been cleft in two. Mercy well knew

the old woman's inflexible nature, and how she ruled others and herself too with a rod of iron, and went through life like one who was the creator of circumstances and not their creature. To see her now, sobbing, and shaking, and helpless, was, to the young girl, a spectacle at once amazing and awful ; but her compassion overcame her fear, and she knelt down beside Miss Crow, and tried to comfort her.

‘Penruddocke may repent of his wickedness,’ whispered Mercy.

‘There is no repentance,’ replied the old woman brokenly. ‘What he is—he is. Gold is gold, and dross is dross, for ever. It is well it should be so, but woe to those in whose beguiled eyes dross looks like gold—year after year—year after year!’ Her voice, so infirm, so fraught with grief, was piteous to hear.

‘Remember Him who said, “Him that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out,”’ said pious little Mercy, her own voice beginning to break now. She was glad, however, to be able to mention the sacred name to her old friend in this moment of suffering. ‘He said, He came to seek and to save that which was lost.’

‘He said so—He said so, poor Dreamer!’ Miss Crow replied in gentler tones than Mercy had ever heard from her on such a subject. ‘He thought himself greater than He was. He was only perishing dust, like you and me!’

At this word, grown suddenly calmer, she took Mercy’s hand, and drew her face downward, and kissed it affectionately. ‘Kind, pure, sweet, good girl!’ she said, ‘will you forsake me, too? Shall I have nothing left—nothing left in all the world?’

‘I shall never forget your kindness to

me,' replied Mercy artlessly. 'I shall always try to please you.'

The old woman drew Mercy's hand to her lips, and kissed it.

'You are true,' she said. 'You could not but be true. But oh, Penruddocke—Penruddocke! How have I been mistaken in you! How bitter a blow for your aunt!'

'Oh, as for her,' cried Mercy, the colour running over her face all at once, 'I must tell you frankly I don't pity Miss Bolton.'

'What do you mean?' asked Miss Crow.

'I mean,' said Mercy firmly, 'that if she is disappointed in her nephew, she may see in that the just judgment of God for her treatment of my father.'

'What!' shrieked the old woman, breaking again into her strange animal cry. 'What is it you say?' She threw away the hand she had been holding, and looked at

Mercy with a fearful expression half wonder and half rage, but the girl did not at the moment see in it the warning of rising passion which it really contained.

‘My father left a little autobiography behind him,’ Mercy began.

At this word, Miss Crow gave a start, and threw her hands clenched in the air, once more repeating the characteristic gesture of her family. A sudden memory had rushed upon her.

‘An autobiography in which,’ continued Mercy steadily, for she was determined to let Miss Crow know the real character of her aunt Diana, ‘he narrates the whole story of his early life. From childhood, until the day he died, his sister was his enemy, and his cruel persecutor. She came to his death-bed, and bargained for me, then a little helpless infant, that she might bring me up, as she has brought up

Penruddocke, in her wicked, unbelieving way. My father treated her offer with scorn. He chose for me a simple life, and an education in the fear of God, rather than wealth under her dominion. Oh, I love him in his grave !' cried Mercy, bursting into tears, and clasping her hands ; ' I love him, for being so good and brave as to make that choice for me ! and I hate that woman you call your friend—my father's persecutor—I hate her—God forgive me for it—her very name is poison in my ears.'

All the time Mercy spoke—and as she went on her excitement increased, and she resolved to say everything that was in her mind—Miss Crow stood silent, her hands clenched, and stretched up in the same attitude. Her face hardly changed, except that an expression of deepening bewilderment and loss of consciousness passed upon it. Each word

Mercy uttered seemed to fall upon her like the stroke of a hammer, and to beat her into deeper amazement and confusion of mind. When the girl finished, Miss Crow had to all appearance forgotten her presence, and where she herself was—forgotten everything, in a word, except what had just fallen upon her ears.

‘So,’ she began, in a voice that made Mercy tremble—it was so low, so piercing, so intense with rage, ‘out of his dusty grave he stabs me! He strikes the last blow. He is craftier than I. There is no answer. I cannot strike back!’

She bit her lips furiously, and gave the groan of an anger that realises its own impotence, and then bowed her head until her chin touched her breast.

‘It is a mad world,’ she said again. ‘All wrong, everywhere the wisest lives fail most :

it is the fool's world—and the rogues'—let others get out of it as quickly as they can, and leave it for those who want a gaming table, or a sty, or a madhouse. Let me go—let the good and the brave go—go of their own will—die—forget—be forgotten—the sooner the better!

Mercy, seeing the old woman's wild manner, began to repent of her indiscretion in speaking of her aunt Diana, and yet she could not unsay anything. But when Miss Crow made this reference to suicide—which was not unintelligible to Mercy, who knew her daring habit of mind—she thought she might try to turn the old woman's thoughts in another direction.

'God will judge the world for its sin and folly one day,' she said. 'Let us wait for that day.'

'God judge the world!' cried the old

woman, looking up fiercely. 'Upon whom will He pass judgment, or what would He reply, if the weakest and worst of His creatures were to stand before Him, and ask why He made so mad a world? Why did He not let it alone? What did you say, girl, about—about my friend Diana?' she added, changing her tone.

'I am sorry I spoke of her at all,' Mercy answered. 'Let us say no more about it.'

'What did you say?' repeated Miss Crow. 'Did you say she had persecuted your father?—that you hated her?—that her very name was poison to you? Did you say it?' She stamped her foot at the last question.

'I did,' replied Mercy. 'Perhaps I was wrong to speak so of your friend in your hearing. Think no more about it. Her faults are hers—not yours.'

‘She never persecuted your father,’ cried Miss Crow, raising her voice to a shriek, while her words flew out of her mouth with flakes of foam. ‘She was good and truthful ; she loved her father. Death was selfish, wilful, passionate, undutiful, all that a son should not be. Diana only treated him as the just should treat transgressors. She did no wrong.’

‘I shall not argue the matter,’ Mercy answered, growing excited herself. ‘I am content with the judgment of those who knew my father, and my aunt also. I do not wish to disturb your friendship, but never mention Miss Bolton’s name to me again.’

‘What do you say ?’ asked Miss Crow, not believing that these decisive words could come from the lips of the village school-mistress.

‘Never mention my aunt’s name to me again,’ repeated Mercy firmly.

‘I leave you,’ cried the old woman. ‘I know you no more. You are like the rest of them. Take back your hand. I will not touch it.’

And so, having resumed the domineering manner by which she was best known, and having, in spite of her fury, regained her composure on the appearance of it, she walked to the door snarling to herself all the way. Mercy followed her.

‘I did not mean to offend you,’ she said, for she had no key to the irregular and unaccountable emotion the old woman had displayed. She felt grieved, too, that she and her patroness should part on these unpleasant terms.

‘You are like the rest of them,’ was the reply. ‘Go back, go back.’

‘And where are you going?’ Mercy asked, she knew not why.

The question struck some deep chord.

‘I am going,’ said Miss Crow, turning round as she spoke, and answering in the deep, dirge-like voice which with her always marked profound but well-controlled emotion, ‘I am going to the one wise and good being I have known in all this miserable world. We shall rest together.’

Judged by her tones, she might have been shedding a tear, but her eyes were dry, and her expression was resolute and unimpassioned.

Mercy understood her to speak of her friend Diana, and was silent; and without another word the old woman hobbled out of the door, and got into her carriage; and Mercy, seeing she would not speak or notice her, drew back into the drawing-room. But curiosity was too strong for her to let Miss

Crow go away quite unobserved, and she took her stand beside the curtain, where, screened from view, she could watch her departure.

She whispered some directions to her servant as he shut her in, and for a moment after he mounted the box the carriage stood motionless.

Then Mercy saw the old woman take from the seat the shrine which she had seen twice before—once in the wood, and once at midnight in the bedroom. Miss Crow opened it, and rested it against the opposite seat of the carriage, and then tapped sharply at the window. At the sound the carriage moved away; and when Mercy caught her last glimpse of the old woman, she had fallen into a kind of praying attitude, her eyes set upon the picture, and her hands devoutly clasped. The next moment she vanished out of sight.

EPILOGUE.

THE sequel of the story is told by Mercy Travis—now Susan Isabel Bolton—Penruddocke Bolton, Theophilus Detmar, and Margaret Daintree, in a series of letters. The circumstances which led to the writing of these letters is briefly explained at the proper places.

LETTER I.

Susan Isabel Bolton to Margaret Daintree.

At the bidding of her physicians, and in the hope of her malady being arrested, Mrs. Daintree had very suddenly left England for Australia, where it was arranged she

should remain two years. The following letter was written a month after her departure : (whatever does not concern the narrative has been omitted).

‘ Only within the past week have I learned the fate of my old friend Miss Crow. I grow cold as I think of it, and perhaps my dear father—so I have begun to call my kindest, best of friends—was wise to keep it secret from me until my health was fully restored, for the tidings gave me a very severe shock. And yet I might have been prepared for the awful event by what I myself had heard. I shall try to relate the story as exactly as I can.

‘ It appears that after leaving your house in the fit of passion which you well remember, Miss Crow drove without stopping, except to change horses, to her own house at Uphill. No sooner had she arrived, than she sent for

all her servants, outdoor and in, and assembled them in her dining-room, where they found her sitting with a great heap of money on the table before her. She asked them one by one how much she owed each for service, and counted out the sum, adding to it three months' wages and board wages for six weeks. When she had gone through all, she told them that they had without exception given her satisfaction, but that from circumstances over which she had no control she would require them no longer, and she desired them to leave the house together at ten o'clock next morning. They were too well acquainted with her eccentricity and her furious temper to wonder at or remark upon this singular order, which they silently prepared to obey. During the night three different servants—so they subsequently declared—heard wild and inexplicable cries in

the house, and violent stamping of feet. Two of the men-servants got up—or more correctly I should say one got up, and went to the bedside of the other and wakened him, fearing to go through the house alone. After looking into several rooms, they softly opened the door of the little morning-room, where they saw a great fire blazing, before which their mistress stood with a large deed-box beside her. She was tearing papers to pieces, and flinging them into the fire with frantic rapidity, and muttering wildly to herself all the time. While they stood there, irresolute and shivering with fear, they saw her draw out one paper upon which she gazed for a moment, and then broke out into one of the wild cries which had awakened them at first. She stamped with her feet upon the floor, tore the paper to pieces, biting it with her teeth, and rending it into shreds, and behaving

altogether with such a wildness of fury that the men were terror-struck. They were, however, satisfied that there was no burglar in the house, and managed to close the door again, and steal away to bed ; for nothing would they have dreaded more than to have been seen by their mistress. Of course the incident was talked over in the servants' hall next morning, but little time was left for gossiping or marvelling, for, punctually at ten o'clock, Miss Crow rang, and asked if her orders had been attended to. All were ready to leave, and she went into the hall, and said good-bye to them, and thanked them for their attention to her, and charged them never to forget to be honest and truthful, and to do their duty, not as eye-servers, but as those who respected themselves. Then she bid them all good-bye again, shaking hands with every one,

and all said that her expression was gentle and sweet, and such as they would like to remember, but none dared to ask what she meant to do in that great house and without servants. So they parted.

‘An hour later a messenger came to the house, and found a small card hanging from the knocker on which there was written a few words, saying that the house was closed for a week, and that letters must be kept at the post-office till called for. After this nothing was heard of Miss Crow for several days.

‘On the sixth day after the servants left, the coroner of Warcaster received a letter, which had been posted in the Uphill post-office late the night before. The letter said that if he would send to the residence of Miss Crow he would find her dead body in a particular room—she indicated the little morning-room—and that she had committed suicide.

She had good reason, the letter said, for leaving the world, and she wished it to be perfectly clear that it was a case of *felo de se*. She hoped there would be no nonsense talked at the inquest about temporary insanity. She was not insane. She knew well what she was about. And among the minor inducements to the step she was about to take was the fact that she would be buried without having any miserable falsehoods read over her body. She had no friends and no executors. If they looked in the drawer of the Davenport which would be found at the foot of the couch on which her body would be lying, they would find ten ten-pound notes, which she hoped would defray all expenses connected with her death.

‘Horrible, is it not, dear! I can hardly write down the awful words. What a marvel this woman was—how unconquerable and how

fatally perverse ! But let me write on, not wasting space on comments which you can easily supply.

‘ The coroner hurried, as I heard, to the chief of police, and they effected an entrance into the house. Everything was quiet and orderly, and they walked to the morning-room at once, so clear had the directions been. The room was darkened ; the chimney was stopped up ; the fireplace was covered over, so that air was excluded ; and, as they opened the door and walked in, the room felt stifling. Cautiously allowing time for ventilation, they advanced and threw open the shutters, and there upon her couch lay the old woman’s body, disposed as if for sleep. Her features were placid, and her watch still ticked on the table beside her, showing that she had not been twenty-four hours dead. But her body was as cold as stone. She had killed

herself, they believed, with the fumes of charcoal.

‘ In the whole house there was not found a solitary letter or paper which could throw any light upon her history. Her personality seemed to melt into nothingness, like a flake of snow.

‘ Shall I weary you with subsequent details? One curious fact let me record. The jury, in spite of the coroner’s direction, refused to bring in a verdict of *felo de se*, and persisted in regarding her prearrangement and method as sure signs of a particular sort of insanity. So the Burial Service was read over her, after all, and her body lies in consecrated ground.

‘ That is all I have to tell you about this awful old woman, who, for all her violence and irreligion, was kind—more than kind to

me. I never like to hear her name mentioned, and my father never speaks of her, but from a bit of a conversation which I overheard one day between him and his son, I gather that her real name was not Crow, and that she had been playing a very strange part. But I ask nothing: I want to hear nothing. The very thought of her end sickens me, when I remember how tenderly she watched over me. There, I must say no more.

‘ What delightful news to hear that even before you started you felt a little better ! I believe the new doctor will be right, after all, and we shall have you with us again for many a happy year.

‘ With *us*, I said without thinking. Oh, dear, you cannot know how kind, how loving, how delicate in every thought and act my

dear father is. Happy are the hours indeed with him, and he seems happy with me.

‘ You will say I am silent about Harry ? I have very little to tell. He is now in Heidelberg, and, indeed, I have only seen him twice since you left. Now I know what you are wanting to ask me—Has he made any proposals to me ? He has not—not a syllable—not a look. I think he shows very good sense, for quite apart from any reply I might make, he may have changed his mind, and no doubt he has. He is only a young man, after all, and they do change. Indeed, I begin to think there must be someone in Heidelberg he likes, or he would not stay there so very long. I shall be glad if he meets with a nice wife : he is so good. But still I think he ought to spend a little more time with his father—don’t you ? Of course it is a little dull for us two, being so much

alone. Hoping to hear good news, and soon, ever your affectionate

‘ MERCY.

‘ P.S. When I said it was dull, I meant dull for my father.’

LETTER II.

Penruddocke Bolton to Theophilus Detmar.

‘ Dear Detmar,—For once I may tell you your cynical prophecies have altogether missed the mark. Mercy Travis that was—or Susan Isabel Bolton, as she now styles herself—did *not* forgive my indiscretion. She listened to my explanations and protestations of penitence, but was inexorable. I made her no offer of marriage, it is true, but she did not give me an opportunity. She is lost to me for ever, and I do not deny that, for a while, the shock was rather a severe one.

But time has sensibly modified my regrets.

The marriage of cousins is not, in my judgment, desirable; and, after all, now that the glamour is dissipated, I can remember that her manners have scarcely the refinement of good society. Indeed, it could not be otherwise, under the circumstances. The freshness of her beauty would wear off, and even the undeniable innocence of her character might become insipidity. So, on the whole, I am glad that the good little Christian did not act up to her light. If she had forgiven me, I must have married her, and I was in the mind of doing it; but now, upon a sober review of the whole affair, I feel that such a marriage would have been a mistake on my side.

‘Married, however, I soon shall be. To whom, think you? The name of my divinity is Treadwell. She is the only daughter of a

wealthy Bengal civilian, who died a year ago, leaving his child twenty-five thousand pounds. She has no mother, as that relative thoughtfully disappeared from this mortal scene two years before her husband. Miss Treadwell is rather under the middle size, blonde, and reputed a beauty. To my taste, her face lacks animation. She is not brilliant in society, but is, I think, amiable after a tame sort. She plays on the piano with wonderful brilliancy, and is thoroughly well bred, which is a great point. Taking her shower of gold into consideration, she seems likely to make a very suitable wife ; and she is pretty enough not to disgrace one's carriage, which her fortune will help to maintain.

‘ But now let me tell you a curious and almost incredible circumstance. It appears that our old friend Miss Crow was none other than my aunt Diana in person. Can

you believe it? We were led to this discovery by one who knew my aunt many years before, and who at once identified Miss Crow as the person whom he had seen under the name of Diana Bolton. When we came to consider the matter, we found that "Miss Crow" had never suffered her face to be seen by anyone who had known Miss Bolton. My father was too blind to see a solitary feature, and I now clearly remember how she avoided his society, and what a constraint his presence seemed to impose upon her on the few occasions when they met. The grand difficulty was—and to a certain extent still is—how her figure could have changed, and her appearance grown so aged. We have, however, found out that Miss Bolton met with a fearful accident immediately after she first left England—so much, indeed, "Miss Crow" told me—while attempting to rescue her father's

manuscripts from a burning house. Her spine was fearfully injured, and it appears that a disease ensued, which gradually warped her figure, and at the same time, of course, reduced her stature, until the middle-sized and middle-aged woman was changed into a crone, with a bowed body and a humped back. This was the joint result of accident and disease, operating through the course of twenty years, and the hand of nature dressed her in a disguise so complete that but little craft was required to hide her identity ; and of craft the old lady had enough, I believe, to have baffled all the detectives in Scotland Yard.

‘She committed suicide, and seems to have prepared for her end with a pagan fortitude. There was not a scrap of paper found in her house ; not a line of writing, not a book with a name in it. She must

have been at work for days, tearing up and burning her papers, for she had drawersful, I know. She played her game astutely, and my father and myself took good care not to let anything slip out about her real name. We found that there was no property to be had, and it would have been injudicious, and hurtful to the family name, to revive a fact which the old woman had so cleverly and completely obliterated. So we took no notice of her death in any way, but simply ignored her ; and with the exception of one or two persons, who are sworn to secrecy, no one knows that the unnoticed mound above her is the last sign that such a singular being as Diana Bolton ever lived. I am sure you will agree with me, that we were prudent in being conveniently ignorant of the trick that had been played upon us.

Write to me soon, and congratulate me

on my prize of gold and beauty. I am sorry to hear of your ill health. Forgive me for asking if your maladies have any connection with the spirit of the grape.

‘ Ever yours,

‘ PENRUDDOCKE BOLTON.’

LETTER III.

(The next letter is dated twelve months later. The most part explains itself, and it need scarcely be added that, in the interval, Penruddocke had been married to Miss Treadwell. Detmar, who had come into a small property, was still living in his favourite Paris, and pursuing a course of furious dissipation, for which he was paying the usual penalty in the shape of a succession of attacks of illness. These of late had been of an alarming kind.)

‘ Dear Detmar,—I write to tell you that my father died a month ago. He had been ailing for some time, and had grown very irritable. His death was a relief to others and to himself, but I inherit nothing, as he had been living on an annuity.

‘ I like our new house very well, and the whole neighbourhood. Have I told you that my wife, who is really a very good wife, is a High Churchwoman? To satisfy her, and, indeed, out of regard for decorum, I attend the parish church every Sunday morning. This is not all. A short time ago our rector, noticing my grave behaviour no doubt, asked me to become his churchwarden—rector's churchwarden. My wife was so pleased at the request, that I consented, and I was unanimously elected to the office, in a crowded vestry, consisting of the rector, the parish clerk, and two pew openers, who

were ordered to attend, that the ceremony might not be conducted in vacuity. After all, I am not sorry to hold the office. I am not so destructive as I used to be, and am willing, in recognition of the usefulness of national religion, to do my duty as a good subject.

‘I hear, from a quarter which I shall not name, that you have been ill again. Do not kill yourself with your pleasures. You must be very greedy of such frolics, to pursue them so far. Do as I have done : marry and settle. Take my word for it, it is absurd to describe married life as dull. I venture to say that I have twice the happiness that you enjoy—and my health into the bargain. Remember that. Come over and see us, and leave your crop of wild oats in France. Marry an English wife, and live like a man of sense. Besides, really, you must be

destroying the finer qualities of your nature, by mixing entirely with the people among whom I hear your life is passed. Forgive plain speech, and take advice.

‘ Ever yours,

‘ PENRUDDOCKE BOLTON.’

LETTER IV.

*To the above, the following reply was
written :*

‘ Dear Pen,—or shall I not rather say, dear Mr. Churchwarden ? or dear Mr. Rector’s Churchwarden, that none of your glory may be lost ?—Your excellent sermon arrived safely, and has done me a world of good, but the tidings of your conversion were still more profitable to my poor soul. I hope you will remember me in your prayers, which will no doubt be promptly attended to,

now that you are a churchwarden, and, in a manner, one of the Firm.

‘Who told you all that stuff about my health? I was poorly for a time, but am well again. No; I will not marry, nor turn good little boy, even for the sublime motive of preserving my health. When I was last in London I consulted Sir Titus Tweezer. He sermonised too, a little, and warned me of consequences, and so on. I contented myself by saying that I had pretty well calculated my chances. I enjoy my present life. It may bring on early death: for that I don’t care particularly, so as there is no pain. And if I go in for a painful disease, I can fight it with opium; and if the disease grows intolerable, I can increase the opium dose to the point which heals all diseases. After that opium dose, God or the devil is welcome to anything they can get of

me. I told Sir Titus—who is a man of thoroughly scientific mind, and knows Mill and Herbert Spencer off by heart—that I liked a short life of excitement better than a long life of virtuous dullness. “Have you anything to say against that?” I asked. He replied with a few of the stock phrases about love, and truth, and virtue being its own reward. I laughed in his face, and I noticed that he could not resist a good-humoured little smile himself.

‘I accept your invitation, and shall see you soon.

‘T. D.’

About three weeks after the above letter was written, Detmar was attacked by a fatal illness, and died soon after in great suffering.

LETTER V.

*Susan Isabel Molton to Margaret
Daintree.*

‘And now, as in my previous letters I have told you the story of our courtship and earliest wedded days, I may add a few words to assure you that every anticipation of happiness I expressed has been fulfilled and surpassed. Never did any man declare his love with more delicacy or fervour—that you know. Was it not almost like a story, how he gave me the sweetest of surprises, by declaring himself in that particular way, just when I concluded that he loved another? And every day since that happy morning I have learned to love him more. His nature is so fine and sensitive, and yet so manly; his love is so ardent, and yet so self-forget-

ting. And when I think who it was I once preferred to him, I feel ashamed to enjoy my great happiness. But no choice remains to me, for every hour he showers new endearments upon me, and I resign myself to him, for he is perfection, and my heart's whole delight.

‘ Seven months of married life have gone by in this happy home. You know the very spot upon which our house stands, and you remember that the sea rolls away before the drawing-room windows, and the woods enclose us behind. From our top rooms we see our father's house, and he is constantly with us—so bright, so happy, so gentle and good in all things. He is like Harry, only not so tall or vigorous, or so wild about field sports. Oh, where is there a woman so happy as I ?

‘ I am looking out upon the sea as I write

to you. On each side of me hangs a portrait—on my left my father, and on my right my mother. How sweet she must have been, and how noble he. They seem to be with me, sharing my earthly joy with the milder satisfaction of blessed spirits, and gazing down upon me with eyes of superior love. The window lies open, and the summer wind is playing on my cheek. The sea is making the softest music on the pebbles. Harry and our father are walking arm in arm together at the end of the garden. Can there be anything—anything—wanting to crown my bliss?

‘ You ask, Could we not meet in Paris, and all return to England together? It would be delightful—but I am afraid, dear, I must not undergo the fatigue of a journey just at present.

‘ You will come to us, and we shall see

you, and talk over the past, and anticipate the future. Tell me in your next when we may expect you, and particularly what the Paris doctors say. Nothing that concerns you will be tedious to your ever loving and grateful little

‘MERCY.’

LETTER VI., AND LAST.

*Margaret Daintree to Susan Isabel
Molton.*

‘My ever-loving and ever-loved little Mercy, — Your letter came to me like a breath of your own summer wind. The Paris doctors quite confirmed what my own revived sensations had already told me. I am not only convalescent, but well : actual disease never existed. I shall be with you

in a fortnight, never to be long parted from you all, till death, I hope.

‘ Oh, dear child, how many lessons I have learned in my long wandering. How deep my gratitude to Him who has spared me to this happy hour. I was bitter and austere in my sorrow, but God has softened and sweetened my lot, and through His mercy I have exchanged my old mood for one far better. Even of him who, as I used to say, poisoned and blackened my life, I think now with something like renewed tenderness. He was wrong, but passion hurried him away, and I hope he is forgiven. At least, he is forgiven by me, and surely the Divine forgiveness and love must be greater than mine. In my present frame of mind I cannot but believe it, for my cup is running over, and all I can say is, “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.” He who is so

good to me, must be good to all ; and must, sooner or later, make His goodness to be realised.

‘ And now, good-bye till this day fortnight. Be very careful of your health, and do nothing imprudent.

‘ Affectionately yours,

‘ MARGARET DAINTREE.’

THE END.

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